

## Suffering – Paul’s Example

2 Corinthians 11:23-27 tells us that during his ministry Paul was imprisoned, flogged, beaten with rods, stoned and shipwrecked. Many times he laboured without food, sleep or adequate clothing. Why did he suffer to such extreme? For the sake of the gospel. Paul, writing from prison, says to Timothy: “And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am.” (2 Timothy 1:11-12a.)

This article seeks to take a brief look at Paul’s sufferings and how they serve as an example to us as Christians and as nurses. It poses the question: how do Paul’s sufferings influence the way we think and work as Christian nurses?

Paul was not deterred from preaching the gospel by his sufferings. He was very much aware that continuing to preach the gospel would bring him trouble and persecution and yet he persevered; he did not sway from the appointed task God had given him as herald, apostle and teacher of the gospel. In Acts 9, even before he set off on his first missionary journey, the Grecian Jews tried to kill him (Acts 9:29). But this didn’t deter him from taking the gospel to the Gentiles. In Pisidian Antioch, as the first journey was under way, many Jews stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and they were expelled from the region (Acts 13:50). Still not deterred, they shook the dust off their feet and moved on to Iconium. After a time preaching in Iconium, the Jews and Gentiles plotted to stone Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:4-7). They moved on to Lystra, where finally the plotters caught up with them and stoned Paul, leaving him for dead. Miraculously, he recovered and completed his first journey. On his second missionary journey, Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi. Yet when they were released, Paul carried on preaching Christ in Thessalonica, Berea, Athens and Corinth (Acts 17:1-3, 10, 16-17 and 18:1-4).

In Acts 20:22-24, Paul says to the Ephesian elders, “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life work nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

In Jerusalem in chains, Paul spoke to the crowd, testifying to the Lord Jesus (Acts 22). Still under arrest, Paul spoke to Felix and King Agrippa about his faith in Jesus (Acts 24:24 and Acts 26) and still under guard in Rome, Paul spoke to the Jewish leaders and anyone who came to see him about Christ (Acts 28:23, 30-31).

So, Paul persevered to the end. He never gave up preaching the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for it he suffered terribly. But what does this mean for us? Paul’s second letter to Timothy helps us with this. In 2 Timothy 1:8 Paul writes, “Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God”. The things Paul implores Timothy to do (and not to do) here also apply to us, in that although we may not be leaders of churches as Timothy was, like Timothy we are followers of Jesus who are called to testify about our Lord. So, what’s Paul saying here? He’s saying, *beware*, we could be ashamed of the gospel, and ashamed to do the work of testifying to the gospel. There were those Timothy knew who had been gospel-believing, Christ-centred Christians but who had wandered from the truth; who had moved away from the evangelical position to a more popular one (2 Timothy 2:17-18), where they faced less persecution. Alternatively, and more subtly, he’s saying we could be ashamed of those who are already suffering for the gospel. Transport yourself back to Paul’s day for a moment and pretend you know him. As we have seen, at the time many Jews were so

zealous against the gospel spreading that they would go to any lengths to remove or have removed those who were involved in its spread. A real possibility in associating with Paul could be to join him in the same troubles and persecution. Today in Britain, the kind of persecution we might face as we align ourselves with those who are already suffering for the gospel is more subtle, we are in less danger of physical assault, although we know in other parts of the world the threat of imprisonment and even death are still very harsh realities.

Many back then avoided such persecution by severing their connections with Paul (2 Timothy 1:15, 4:10 and 16). The question is are we prepared to be maligned or to suffer in any way for the sake of standing by all that Paul stands for, or under pressure will we desert Paul too, and in doing so, desert Jesus?

The exhortation to us in 2 Timothy 1:8 is to join Paul in suffering for the gospel. And Paul is quite plain that there is no alternative to suffering when it comes to proclaiming the gospel: 'everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Timothy 3:12). It is inevitable that we will suffer if we stand up for the gospel, by testifying to Christ and by admitting that we are co-workers with those who are themselves suffering for the gospel. So the challenge to us is how this works out in our daily lives as Christian nurses. From what we have seen of Paul's example I want to make three brief points which may help us in our thinking through this huge challenge:

First, we have seen Paul's suffering was for the gospel. As nurses we do important work and we may suffer many trials in our work but unless we testify to the Lord Jesus our suffering is not for the gospel.

Second, as Paul expected to suffer for the gospel, we too should expect to suffer as we testify to our non-Christian colleagues, even patients/clients at work: Many will not take us seriously, to some our integrity as nurses will plummet, some may tease openly, some behind our backs, perhaps there may even be some who will disassociate with us altogether.

Third, when we begin to suffer like this the temptation will be strong to stop proclaiming the gospel. But following Paul's example will mean not being deterred but seeking to keep going in testifying to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus, not just today or tomorrow but until God brings us safely into his heavenly kingdom.

Our challenge, which is immense, is to take on Paul's attitude to suffering for the gospel: 'I consider my life work nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.'

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. In what situations are you likely to be ashamed of the gospel and therefore keep quiet about gospel truths:
  - a) In lectures?
  - b) On placement?
  
2. Have you been in a situation where you have been ashamed of standing alongside another Christian nurse or midwife who is suffering for the gospel?
  - a) What made you unable to stand with them?
  - b) How can you be better prepared for such situations in the future?
  - c) How do Paul's comments in 2 Timothy 1:7 help us to be bold and active in testifying to Jesus?

3. In Acts 20:22-24 Paul affirms that his goal is to keep persevering to the end. Look at Philippians 3:12-4:1.
  - a) What is it that helps Paul to keep his sense of perspective, to keep persevering?
  - b) How can this help us when faced with persecution and the temptation to keep quiet about Jesus?
  - c) Look back to your answers to question 1, how might Paul's perspective on persevering help you to speak up in these particular situations?
  
4. What will it take for you to be like Paul, to be undeterred from proclaiming the gospel on placements and in lectures in the face of tremendous persecution? Why not pray for these things now?