

Several passages in the New Testament indicate the attitude of the apostles in regard to sharing the sufferings of Christ. We read in Phillipians 1:29 that it has been 'granted' to us to suffer for the sake of Christ, as though it was a gift. Later in that letter (3:10) Paul tells us that we have the opportunity to share in the sufferings of Christ and thus in the resurrection.

We must realize that we do not have to suffer to be a Christian. It is not a requirement, but it most certainly is likely to be a consequence. We see that the symbol of Christianity is the cross, not a mattress or a lounge chair. We cannot participate passively in it as we would a football game, sitting back in the comfort of our own home, not really aware of the intense pain felt by those whose bones are broken out on the field. It is not necessary to suffer, but we certainly need to be ready for it. And this is something that regular contact with the broken body of Christ can enable us to do.

Likewise, pain is not essential to salvation, but it is a natural consequence of living. It was necessary for Christ to suffer; indeed he refused anything that might deaden the pain (Mark 15:23). Christ had to be in complete control at all times, and would not let his mind be numbed.

Jesus said in Matthew 16:24 that we should deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. We must remember that this was said before Christ was actually crucified. But what does it mean exactly? What is our cross? How can we take it up? Christ is indicating here that there must be a definite sharing of the suffering that he was about to undergo.

Christ spoke in John 18:11 of his forthcoming death as a 'cup of suffering', when he said, 'shall I not drink of the cup which the Father has given me?' This analogy of the cup can be applied in an interesting way, I think, to a statement made by Paul in Colossians 1:24, "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church." Paul seems to be comparing his life to a cup, which is to be placed under a faucet from which flows the continuing stream of those things to be suffered by the body of Christ. Christ, on earth, had already filled his cup there. Paul is then saying that he is more than happy to fill his cup to the brim there, too.

Another place that the 'cup' and suffering are thought of together is in the memorial of the fruit of the vine in the Lord's Supper. Here we rejoice in Christ's suffering for us, having a very blessed fellowship and communion with him. We usually think only of the blessings relating to this act. But the Greek word for fellowship, *Koinoneo*, also implies a sharing, as we read in 1 Peter 4:13, "But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings..." As we have fellowship with him in our communion, to what extent are we willing to have fellowship with his suffering? Are we just fair-weather friends? We need to realize that we must take the responsibility with the blessing. In a sense, Christ asks us, as he does James and John in Matthew 20:22, "Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" Can we answer from our hearts as they did, 'We are able!'?

Paul carried this ability to the point of actually having scars. We read Galatians 6:17 that he bore in his body the marks of Jesus. Of course, we know of the great sufferings that he went through for the sake of the church. But it seems to me that we should also have a distinguishing mark that sets us off as Christians. As the poet Amy Carmichael wrote, 'Can he have followed far, Who has no wound? No Scar?' In John 13:35 we read that the badge or mark of Christians is that we love each other. Think about the face of Christ, if you will, at that moment of agony when he announced, 'Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do'. Now, many of us are able to forgive and forget after the pain of being hurt has gone away. But Christ was able to do that at the most intense moment of his pain. And so should we: this is the mark, then that sets us off from the world. No matter what the scars of battle are, we show this kind of love, because it was shown to us, and because we know it is right and good.

Christ is knocking on the door of our heart. As John Stott says, "The hand that knocks is scarred." The same could be said of His heart. We have the glorious privilege of being sought after and loved by Christ. He offers to share with us all of the Good things that He has in a great banquet, and we see the prelude to this every time we share in the communion. Let us carry the scars of our communion with honor.