



PAIN AND PREPARATION

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him. (Philippians 1:29, NIV)

SURELY J.B. HOLMES IS HOPING FOR A BETTER 2014. The long-bombing two-time winner on the PGA Tour faced a harrowing brain surgery in the fall of 2011, an event that caused him to say, “You’ve just got to put your faith in God and just hope everything comes out good.” For the most part it did. Doctors removed the malformations they were after, but much of Holmes’ 2012 season was lost.

Then in 2013, after just five early tournaments, Holmes hit a rut. Literally. He was rollerblading near his home in Florida and broke his ankle. He didn’t walk 18 holes again until late September.

It’s hard to imagine what life would be like without suffering. After all, there is no such thing. But when it starts to pile itself on us as though we’ve prayed for it all, it sets you to wondering to just what is going on here.

In Scripture, however, we get some insights for our wondering, explanations for our suffering. To the Philippians, Paul wrote that it is “granted to you...to suffer” for Christ and “I want to share in [Christ’s] suffering.” James exhorted us to “count it all joy when we encounter trials.” Peter chimed in: “Since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.”

Suffering is our human lot, whether we are in Christ or apart from him. But, as the apostles were aware, another layer—maybe even another degree—of suffering comes to us because we choose Christ. A preaching Links Player in Southern California is not kidding when he says, “New levels, new devils!” Because you have chosen to identify with Christ, you must be prepared to identify with him in every way: in challenge, in ridicule, in dismissal, in persecution, even in physical pain.

Not all of these sufferings have been true of all God’s people in every place or time. But we must recognize that suffering allows us to better understand the price Christ paid on our behalf, as well as to grow in characteristics he desires to see in us. We do not do well to sidestep suffering, if only because it gives us great hope for the life that is to come.

Opening questions: Times of suffering

In what ways have you recently suffered? How has this suffering been a teacher for you? Where have you found strength in the midst of it?

Paul’s sufferings

Read 2 Corinthians 11:21b-30 and 12:7b-10. What kinds of suffering did Paul experience in his service to Christ?

In what way do these accounts change your perspective on the suffering that comes your way because of your activity in Christ’s kingdom?

Are you one who boasts in your sufferings, complains of them, rejoices in them? How might you move to praise for your sufferings?

Temporary trouble and great hope

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. How does this passage encourage you specifically today? How does Christ himself help in your suffering for him?
