

Understanding the Blessing of Persecution

by

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Introduction

Father Tadros Y. Malaty writes the following in his *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church*:

The Copts insisted on starting their calendar by the beginning of the reign of Diocletian, in 284 AD, calling it “Anno Martyri,” for in his reign the Church gained numerous numbers of martyrs, who are now glorified in Paradise. About the eleventh of September of every year we celebrate the commencement of a new Coptic year, calling it “Feast of El-Nayrouz,” in which we celebrate the Feast of Martyrs, as a spiritual preparation for starting a new year.

By this unique understanding, the Church of Alexandria has shown the world her deep spiritual faith, her vision that leads to eternity and her concept of martyrdom. She did not consider martyrdom as death or something terrible, but rather a new birth which is an entry to paradise.¹

One can only admire the faith and devotion of our Coptic brothers and sisters, not only to God, but to their community that transcends death. They call it “a new birth,” thus establishing an image in our minds that we, as Christians, are never really separated from our parent. We are carried in the darkness of the womb, only to be delivered on to a new life, a transcendent life.

¹ Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty, *Introduction to the Coptic Orthodox Church* (Alexandria, Egypt: St. George's Coptic Orthodox Church, 1993), 27.

The Coptic church remains connected to the martyrs in a very concrete way, and this is something that protestants have lost in their rejection of relics, i.e. the connection to the tangible remains of the saints. I will not enter a theological discussion about relics now. Whether one agrees with the veneration of bones or not, there is an underlying theology about the human body in these practices that is already present in some form or another in the writings of the Apostle Paul which we all, hopefully, share.

The Body

The physical body is extremely important for Paul. He is no Platonist. He does not despise matter. The body, for him, is the realm in which testimony to God is given. Within his own Jewish heritage, this was primarily done through the sign of circumcision, an issue that comes up many times in his letters.

Therefore, he is not accustomed to despising the body, but he considers it to be the greatest instrument of the believer for the purpose of demonstrating where one belongs to. This he makes clear from the first chapter where he mentions his body and how he exalts Christ with it in verse 20:

“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always **in my body**, whether by life or by death. (NRS)”

Paul moves beyond the *ethnic* bodily sign of circumcision to other ways through which the body expresses allegiance and glorifies his savior. He sees that it is through physical suffering that the gospel is advanced (1:12). The chains that constrained his body were actually effective in dispelling all fear from his brothers and sisters. One would have expected that Paul's chains would *impart* fear in the church, but the exact opposite had happened. His chained body infused the church with confidence for a bold witness.

Therefore, Paul concludes that it is not departing from the body, but inhabiting it, that bears fruit. It is not a useless mass of flesh and bones, but it demonstrably grows the kingdom of God, it plants churches in the gentile world, it encourages believers to continue the work of the gospel (1:22). Now, we must keep in mind that it was much

harder for Paul to say this than it is for us today. We forget that “modern medicine makes it much easier to celebrate bodies. Our progenitors didn’t have Novocain, C-sections, or sodium pentothal. The burden of the flesh was much heavier upon them,”² as Dale Allison reminds us. Platonism would have been the most attractive philosophy to hold, as it correlated with their lived experience. Yet Paul insists in the value of the body.

The body will exalt Jesus, whether it lives or dies, according to Paul. Death is a gain, surely, because in death one is with Christ and physical miseries come to an end. It is a much better state (πολλῶ μᾶλλον κρείσσον [1:23]). This agrees with the record of Jesus’ saying on the cross to the repentant criminal “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luk 23:43 NRS)

However, while it is a personal gain for Paul to move on from this life, he prefers the bodily suffering precisely because it generates more fruit for the kingdom. The suffering of his body is love for the church in action. Jesus himself did not choose to remain outside the body, in the fleshless “form” of God for his own benefit but took on a body “the form of human flesh” for the sake of the church (2:5-8). So, how could Paul prefer to move into the opposite direction of the one Jesus took? He does not. He chooses the community, even if that means carrying a body of pain.

Paul makes it even more graphic that he is referring to the actual shape our flesh and bones take, by using expressions about the bodily *form*. He is not speaking of an abstract concept of humanness, but about an actual human shape. This is the reason he goes out of his way to stress the shape that Christ took, by using expressions such as “form of a slave, likeness of humans, shape of a human being” (ἀλλ’ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφήν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος· καὶ σχήματι εὑρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος [2:7]). You don’t get more tangible than that!

The word μορφή (“form”) is the physical appearance of a person and it is regularly used in the Bible as a substitute to the body or body parts, especially the face of a person that can be altered as the expressions change due to fear or sadness (TH

² Dale C. Allison Jr., *Night Comes: Death, Imagination, and the Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 33.

Dan 3:19, 4:36, 5:6, 9, 10, 7:28). Μορφή (“form”) is also the tangible figure that the idea of a statue takes in the hands of the carpenter (LXX Isa 44:13)

Therefore, when we get to our central text, Philippians 3:10, and after Paul has used the word μορφή twice already, he adopts a rare compound word made of the term μορφή: συμμορφιζόμενος or συμμορφούμενος (lit. “co-shaped”). He is speaking about sharing the same form of Christ, but he is not speaking of the exalted form of Christ, the preexistent form of God from which Christ had emptied himself, but of the form of his death. And we have an idea of what that looked like: beaten, bleeding, chained, naked, bruised, hungry, thirsty, pierced all of that.

In other words, for Paul, identification with Christ has to include identification with Christ’s degraded body that was subjected to death and the imitation of Christ is not simply a spiritual exercise but it is visible and fully felt in our physical bodies. The body is the realm of our humiliation. Not that Paul is encouraging self-inflicted suffering nor is he congratulating his persecutors for oppressing him. He is saying that this physical humiliation is valuable since it is this same humiliation that Christ embraced by emptying himself from his divine form and taking on a body that *could* be humiliated. In a sense, Paul is not passively mourning what is done to his body, but he is actively embracing this humiliation in the manner of his savior’s *kenosis* (“emptying”).

The exact same events or circumstances of affliction can be interpreted as humiliation in the eyes of the powerful, but in the stance of the persecuted they are taken as active resistance. It is the choice of allegiance to the incarnated God who emptied Himself into a suffering body of death.

Here I would like to pause and remember our Coptic brothers and sisters who have held firmly to this same posture, especially in our current decade, in the midst of their own persecution. We remember the Easter church bombings, the pilgrims killed by extremists, the 15 girls, if not more, in Minya who were kidnapped in 2017 to be forced to marry Muslims and convert to Islam, and the constant discrimination in all areas of life by local authorities.³ These are unwanted beatings, but the active resistance of our

³ Harriet Sherwood, “Christians in Egypt face unprecedented persecution, report says.” *The Guardian*, January 10th, 2018. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/10/christians-egypt->

brothers and sisters receives these sufferings as being of the same form as those of our savior, and to the more fortunate among us who are witnessing the suffering of our brothers and sisters, we see the same form of Christ in them, the same beaten body of our Lord demonstrated before us from Egypt. His body of death is tangible, it is visible, and it is local to Egypt (as well as in other places). We can actually go and stand before their blood-stained clothes in the cultural center of Cairo. We see it and we are emboldened in the gospel as well.

What will happen to this tangible μορφή (“form”) of humiliation and death that is before us? He says in 3:21:

He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be *conformed* (lit. co-shaped). Here he uses another compound adjective of μορφή: *σύμμορφον*) to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (3:21 NRS)

Again, the emphasis is on the physical transformation of the σώμα (body) into the μορφή (form) of Christ’s current glorious resurrected body. Our suffering body that now participates in the form of his death is also to be made into the form of his glory, thus following the same pattern that Christ’s body has been through. Nowhere do we see an escape from the body, a rejection of physical suffering. Instead, we see continuity from one to the other. We see the same body that is in pain before death, somehow mysteriously connected to its glorious self beyond death. Death is not oblivion. It is the passage that will reveal the reality of glory that is now hidden in these fragile figures that carry us around. And the greater the affliction of these fragile bodies in the present, the more magnified the glory of this coming transformation will be! This grant contrast will be the grant testimony.

Joy and Resurrection

However, the physical body is what is used by some of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries as well in order to attain to life in the world to come. He calls them “mutilators of the

[unprecedented-persecution-report](https://forbinfull.org/2019/03/11/long-read-the-history-of-religious-persecution-in-egypt/). The History of Religious Persecution in Egypt. *Forb in Full*. March 11th, 2019. Online: <https://forbinfull.org/2019/03/11/long-read-the-history-of-religious-persecution-in-egypt/>

flesh” (3:2). They are those who “put confidence in the flesh” (3:3). This is the attitude that Paul himself had before encountering Jesus: circumcision, pride in ethnic identity, zeal for persecuting the church and for keeping the law to the letter (3:4-6). The body in the service of achievement.

Often, in ancient Jewish accounts of martyrdom from the 2nd century B.C. we see, not simply strict law keeping by devout Jews, but a full-on war between the Maccabees and pro-Hellenist Jews who wanted to assimilate elements of the Greek way of life to their Jewishness, such as participation in the gymnasias and even disguising their physical mark of circumcision in order to join the games (1 Macc 1:11-15). The Maccabees felt persecuted by the pro-Hellenists but also from the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes who wanted to impose Hellenism in Judaea. The Maccabees were zealous for their devotion to God and were willing to go into battle to die for their Jewishness, with the rallying cry “Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come out with me!” (1 Ma. 2:27 NRS).⁴

The sufferings of these martyrs were often understood, among other things, to be chastisements for personal sins, i.e. as personal atonement (2 Macc 7:18, 32, 33), or chastisements for national sins (Dan 9:8, 2 Macc 6:12-16, 7:38).⁵ These Jews had similar aspirations of resurrection and they are, in fact, the precursors of the belief in a bodily resurrection that Christians later inherited. The church was inspired by them. Origen, for example, in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, regards the Maccabees as great examples to the Christians of courage and perseverance under torture (XXII-XXVII).⁶

Paul, however, differs from his Jewish compatriots, a certain group of them at least, in that he no longer regards such zealousness and the labour of the physical body as the agent that *generates* their heavenly reward. Such an understanding would make Jesus Christ redundant since the labour by itself would be adequate to achieve for him the world to come.

⁴ John S. Pobee, *Persecution and Martyrdom in the Theology of Paul* (JSNTSup 6; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 19-25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-36.

⁶ Rowan A. Greer, *Origen* (New York; Ramsey; Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979).

Radical forms of the understanding that one's death can gain paradise could actually characterize the violent martyrdom of Islamic extremists who are looking to win a paradise through their suicide and their killing of others. Far from this, Paul grounds his understanding of suffering and resurrection on the resurrection *already* attained by Jesus himself.

Jesus' resurrection is the starting point. It is not an aspiration for a possible event in the far future. For Paul, the resurrection that gives meaning to his suffering is an event that lies both in the past (Christ's resurrection) and in the future (the Church's resurrection). Suffering is bracketed by resurrection, thus the sufferer is animated by it. Let us look at this bracketing as it becomes most apparent in 3:10-11:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (NRS)

Resurrection is simultaneously the fuel of enduring suffering and the goal to which suffering takes you. Resurrection is not something that my suffering earns. God does not want their children to go through ordeals in order to win a prize. It is not a bargain with God because it's already been achieved. So, it is both the animating power that enables the martyr to endure, and the reward as well. Paul himself clarifies this, lest someone interprets his suffering as simply substituting the "works of the law" of his former life. He says in 3:12: "I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. (NRS)". He is bracketed in Jesus! "Attaining" is not about winning a reward, but it is about knowing Him, Paul says in 3:10, and that means knowing the full journey of Jesus: from his humiliation to his glorification. Recently, Rowan Williams gave primary importance to the role of the body in knowing, rather than living solely in our heads.⁷ Paul is clearly embracing the experiential knowledge of Christ that his physical suffering is offering him.

This understanding of suffering and resurrection clarifies why Paul insists on joy in this beautiful letter to the Philippians. Close to ten times Paul mentions "joy" in this

⁷ Rowan Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds, Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018), 49-68.

letter, something that has always troubled me and I could not understand how one could rejoice in the midst of suffering without simply pretending or having a shallow sentiment. When I am attacked by my fellow believers I am in pain, even anger. Joy is the last thing that I experience and the last thing I would want someone to exhort me to.

I believe that his command to rejoice in the Lord makes sense in the light of this particular suffering, i.e. the suffering which is *not* a means of achieving the favor of God or earning resurrection. This kind of suffering that is not dependent on the effectuality of one's human efforts and the uncertainty that goes with it cannot but be a source of joy.⁸ Otherwise, it would be a source of anxiety, fear, angst, competition. It would be identical to having confidence in the flesh. It is Christ who is the generating power, the cause, the one who controls and secures power over death, and the one who is faithful to bring about the Resurrection. Paul's task is that of "eagerly (actively) awaiting" this to be initiated from heaven:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. (3:20-21 NRS)

Dale Allison says:

If there's an agent in death, it can only be God. We 're reduced to hope. Our incapacity makes us like Jesus on the cross. All he could do was close his eyes and commit his spirit to Another.

Maybe, once we become acclimatized to whatever ultimately awaits us, there'll be a place for our decisions and our efforts. But at the moment when we pass from here to there, it'll be like our first coming into this world. When born, we were ignorant and passive, and we couldn't provide for ourselves. All we

⁸ On the understanding that Paul is not doubting the certainty of the future resurrection see Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 254-260.

could do was instinctively cry out for nourishment and comfort. And as it was in our beginning, so will it be at our end.⁹

This truth, this surrendering to the agent who is guaranteed to take us through the waters of death, is Paul's source of joy and ours (1:6). We are safe, even when we fall into the unsafe hands of our oppressors. We stand secure, even when we are threatened by our enemies, because our bodies have a future, they are firmly held through the grave and beyond.

At the same time, no positive thing that we currently do to the body is meaningless. Paul hopes to send Timothy back to the Philippians because he will show genuine concern for their welfare, he says (2:19-24). The Philippians too had already sent Epaphroditus to take care of Paul's needs and even risked his life with a serious illness in order to serve Paul (2:25-30). If this body has no future or hope of being transformed, if there is absolute discontinuity between our fragile bodies and our glorified ones then why would one spend a single second caring for them?

Jesus himself cared for bodies, healing and feeding them, during his earthly ministry. He even welcomed care for his own body by people such as the Samaritan woman whom he asked for water, the women who ministered to him in his travels, or the woman with the alabaster jar who anointed his feet. And even in his death we see Joseph of Arimathea taking care of his dead body, as well as the women with burial spices looking to anoint him in the tomb. Interestingly, even in what is thought to be a post-resurrection scene in Matthew 25:31-46, the determining factor for people's fate seems to be their approach to the tangible physical needs of others, and through those to Jesus:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'
(25:35-36 NRS)

⁹ Allison Jr., *Night Comes*, 43.

How remarkable that our attitude towards physical bodies *now* has effects that are carried over beyond the grave and is even determinative of our lives in the coming kingdom!

George Makeen¹⁰ challenged us to think of the questions that our doctrines and theological language raise in young people who are disconnected from the church. “What does belief in physical resurrection would mean for my life?” a young person could ask. But, before rushing to reply, can we point them to how the church lives and what the church does so that they could conclude “yes, it is obvious that the resurrection of people’s bodies is the future you people anticipate”?

¹⁰ “Witness Through the Media.” Plenary talk given on 6/11/19 at the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative, Orthodox-Evangelical Consultation, Monastery of St Bishoy, Wadi el-Natrun, Egypt.