

What has life been given to us for?
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Have ye suffered so many things in vain?

As preparation for teaching, leading and directing Shakespeare, the most important thing is to read the text. Then read the text again. Then, remember to let the text speak for itself, you read the play and you highlight it, mark it up, underline certain lines, entry exclamations points and stars and checks in the margin. Then, begin to read secondary sources, commentaries, critical notes and reviews . . . taking care to keep the play itself the main thing! Listen to what others have thought, collect opinions, ponder them **and begin to form your own opinion**. *Jesus never heard Scripture apart from commentary!* Exercise caution about injecting into the play, thoughts and insights that come from outside the play—especially those insights which come to you. Listening to what the “authorities” have to say is always helpful to the critical reader who remembers always that the play is the thing. *This is, by definition, reading well.*

And, as I must point out, these reading practices bode well for the correct handling of Scripture. Stare at the text, examine the text, question the text, read and read it again . . . do due diligence to the text, remembering always that when it comes to Scripture: Scripture is the final authority. Know it. *This is handling the word well.*

Question the text—critically, that is open-mindedly **rather than with an attitude, or bias . . . with reverence, yes, but not with a pre-determined outcome**. After reading **Have ye suffered so many things in vain?** and reading it again, we may be brought to the place of inquiry: what does the Apostle Paul mean by this interrogative? Depending on your point of entry (who’s the **ye**? What is the reference of **suffered**? **Many things**, what are these “things” likely to be? Then, why **in vain**? Does Paul mean to no purpose? *Have you attended the school of life and learned nothing?* Our exposition probably, *from case to case*, will vary considerably.

So, let’s take **suffering** and render it as **experienced**. **Have you experienced all that you’ve experienced and gained nothing from it?** So, if we liberate suffering from its mainly negative connotation, and if we clear it of its association with aversion (suffering is something “painful” that you take something to alleviate the suffering thereof), which the word “experience” does because experience now covers both joys and sorrows, the up’s and down’s. Nothing’s excluded. Here’s a speech from Shakespeare that embodies this idea: “Suffer love! A good epithet! I do suffer love indeed, for I love thee against my will.” Benedict, Act 5. 2. “Much Ado”

<https://quotepark.com/quotes/832527-william-shakespeare-suffer-love-a-good-ephitet-i-do-suffer-love-inde/>

„Also, for more understanding, this blessed word was said: Lo, how I loved thee! Behold and see that I loved thee so much ere I died for thee that I would die for thee; and now I have died for thee and suffered willingly that which I may. And now is all my bitter pain and all my hard travail turned to endless joy and bliss to me and to thee. How should it now be that thou shouldst anything pray that pleaseth me but that I should full gladly grant it thee? For my pleasing is thy holiness and thine endless joy and bliss with me. This is the understanding, simply as I can say it, of this blessed word: Lo, how I loved thee. This shewed our good Lord for to make us glad and merry.“ — Julian of Norwich, English theologian and anchoress 1342 - 1416

„I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness and the willingness to remain vulnerable.“ — Anne Morrow Lindbergh, book Gift from the Sea

On this reading, with this background, Paul’s interrogative broadens into something like this: Has your Christian experience taught you anything, grown you up in the Lord? Or, on the other hand, has it been largely irrelevant, pointless, or, to suggest a metaphor, the task of “connecting the dots” in your experience as a Christian has it been either challenging, or exceedingly difficulty?! For instance, your conversion experience and your worship life seem to be related, but you can’t express just how. Does life seem pointless at this point in time?

Again, question the text—critically; that is open-mindedly. Read with heart memory? This does not mean skeptically, for that gives too much “leverage” to doubt and suspicion where neither may be warranted.

So, there is integrity to the process—Have you read the text? Yes. Have you read it again? Have you sought to strip away prejudice and bias? That’s what it means to “let the text speak for itself.” Have you shelved your preconceived ideas? The implications of your “worldview,” or “emotional state?” Or, have you admitted frankly that your reading is “Christian,” humanist, psychological or whatever, honestly. Your angle of view, perspective, life situation can function as distortions—they are unavoidable, but “owning” them makes your approach both transparent and honest. Again, these are but intangibles, but they are important. The careful reader is self-aware, in touch, informed and cautious about

“only seeing what they want to see.” Reading often and regularly, prevents some interference.

Have ye suffered so many things in vain?

The careful, Christian reader is self-aware. I did not say, self-conscious because that would take us in another direction. I examine this verse and realize that on some level *it is interrogating me!* Have I learned how to read intelligently, and thoughtfully, and then, casting my self-awareness behind me and jumped into a passage naively, or presumptuously? Well, as a matter of fact, I have. I have done this even with passages I presume to think I have down pat. Passages that I think I have soundly considered, grasped and therefore “understood.” Contrariwise, I remember well, reading a play. And then, upon re-reading the same play, being amazed at what was in it that I missed the first time around. . . and the second!

Here’s an example, from sermon preparation. Alexander Maclaren wrote a sermon, “Lessons of Experience,” based on the very text we are examining this morning. I have read this sermon a number of time (at least three—as I can tell by the highlighting, underlinings and markings). And, to my dismayed amazement, upon the fourth reading (minimally, so), I discovered that I had completely missed his main point! And the evidence, proof was right there, **unmarked** in any way.

“It is a touching proof of the preponderance of pain and sorrow that by degrees the significance of the word (“suffering”) has become inextricably intertwined with the thought of sadness; still, it is possible to take it in the text as meaning experienced or felt, and to regard the Apostle as referring to the whole of the Galatians’ past experience, and as founding his appeal for their steadfastness on all the joys as well as the sorrows, which their faith had brought them.” Vol. 14, p.109 Expositions, a year end sermon.

The passage was untouched! Virgin print, white! Yet Maclaren was pointing out that the meaning of suffering has shifted in the direction of sorrow and sadness, a significant linguistic shift. But the fundamental insight is that the Christian experience of the Galatians, both their joys and their sorrows, should validate their faith *and produce perseverance in faith. A broader view of suffering!*

Oops. Now how I miss that? Is it so simple as not paying attention?

However, it gets worse, or better (as the case may be). Because, in the matter of what this text is asking of me, I, like the Galatians, am compelled to ask myself, “what we have made of all our experiences in the past?, Or rather what, by help of them, have we made of ourselves?” (p. 110) Maclaren presses on me, as Paul pressed on the Galatians, “the duty of retrospect.” *This duty is so good for us, it delivers us* “from our prevailing absorption in the present.” We are too

stuck in the present; it is “too weighty.” Past blessings, the good that God has delivered on . . . the former freshness of life, the vigor of youth and recollection of its high aspirations “which elevated our past selves,” can also elevate us from the “common-places of today.”

“We see things more better and more clearly when we get a little away from them.” We must embrace ways of distancing ourselves, perspective demands it (!) even where urgency denigrates it. Such a *retrospect* may rescue us from the trite, the trivial and the degrading! A lively sense of our past can replicate excitement in our lives.

However, to avoid allowing our retrospect to devolve into frivolity, and sin, “memory must be in closest union with conscience.” Apart from that, the trip down memory lane may only be sentimental luxury . . . escapism, illusion and delusion.

Memory must include discernment of the effects of our joys and sorrows on the moral formation of our character; as in improving, or degrading the same. Moral retrospect distinguishes us as becoming to a man, and not to as an animal. “To remember is only then blessed and productive of the highest possible good in us” . . . when we seek to ascertain “what effect on our present characters our past experiences have had.” (p. 111) We look to the fruit that follows the fallen blossoms. A lovely, truthful phrase for sanctification. It’s not vain.

“Our whole lives, with all their various and often opposite experiences, are yet an ordered whole, having a definite end. There is some purpose beyond the moment to be served.” “It is life that makes men; an infant is a bundle of possibilities, and as the years pass, one possible avenue of development after another is blocked. The child might have been anything; the man has become hardened and fixed into one shape.” (Maclaren, p. 111) All this variety of impulses and complicated experiences need the cooperation of the man himself if they are to reach their highest results in him. Moral character must result in moral agency or that life is vain. But it takes “carefulness and persistent effort on our parts,” the urgent question is: “What has life been given to us for?” Examining that question will enable us to answer “how far we have used life to attain the highest ends of living”. . . or not. “The unexamined life is not worth living.”—Socrates?

Here’s the lowest bar. *Suppose that we received life that we might learn truth*. If our experience has not taught us wisdom, true knowledge, then that life has been in vain. How few are those in our company who have acquired “independent and intelligent opinions”—well-versed, well-read with disciplined minds! How many more are like a sports crowd, swaying by the gusts of passions generated by the play on the ground. Still others, by blind prejudice, careless and thoughtless, moved by influencers, pretenders and quacks of all kinds—as ephemeral as last night’s newscast. Some claim their unexamined opinions to be their convictions to the detriment of the latter! Too dishonest to admit to the unwisdom, whimsy and

foolishness they represent. If we do not learn to be wiser by the exposure of our folly, shame on us. "An infinite source of wisdom is open to us, and all the rich variety of our lives' experiences has been lavished on us to help us, and what have we made of it all?"

The second bar consists in the reality that we are made moral creatures. Yes, we were created to become wise and good as well. What is granted in infant potentialities for good—to live well, love well and to do good—if these are not actualized, then that life is morally vain. *It is a failure of life for virtue to not appear, and for it not to thrive.* The world is full of failures no doubt, those on whom the discipline of life has proved wasted. Jeremiah 2:30 sadly records: **In vain have I smitten them children, they have received no correction.** As that was of Israel's children—what of the rest of the world? "There is no sadder waste than the waste of sorrow and alas! we all know how impotent our afflictions have been to make us better. But not afflictions only have failed in their appeal to us, our joys have as often been in vain as our sorrows, and memory, when it turns its lamp on the long past, sees so few points at which life taught us to love goodness, and to be good, that she may well quench her light and let the dead bury the dead." (p. 113)

Yet comes a third bar, higher still: men were made for God . . . we are the only creatures made capable of worship, or true religion. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." This is in harmony with the ends of truth and goodness! They all find completeness here. The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord and that fear is also the beginning of goodness. "If men are made to need God, and capable of possessing Him, and of being possessed by Him, then the great question, for all of us is, *has life with all its rapid whirl of changing circumstances* and varying fortunes, *drawn us closer to God*, and made us *more fit* to receive more of Him?" Some who are considered dazzling successes in this world and ghastly failures in reality. Have you suffered in vain?

Paul's question: dear Galatians, what has the effect of your Christian experience been? Are you not wiser, better and more devout than you were before Christ came upon you through the preaching of the gospel? Is that God's fault? Or is the blame to be laid on your refusal to be disciplined? Why have you moved in the direction of the unfaithful, ungrateful and spiritually obdurate? Having a new heart, are you so set on switching back in the old, diseased one?

Friends, consider our grace. What the world says is **What I have written, I have written.** (John 19:22) These solemn and terrible words set forth an assertion of an irrevocable past. This is the best the world can do! "Whether life has achieved the ends for which it was given or no, it has achieved some ends. It may have made us into character the very opposite of God's intentions for us, but it has made us into certain characters which so far as the world sees, can never be unmade, or remade. The world preaches the indelibility of character ("once a felon always a

felon,” once a drunk, a whore or an addict, always the same,”) This dread and dreary fatalism portrays the effects of a dead past laid on our shoulders, there is no hope for you! (If you are white you are racist, it’s innate, can never be changed . . . black lives matter, no matter what matter means . . . those who dissent are domestic terrorist. . . and on and on its goes.) **What I have written, I have written . . .** is very like, **Abandon all Hope, ye who enter here!** These are violent contradictions to the infinite hope brought into the world by Jesus Christ. (p. 115)

“What we have written we *have* written, and we have no power to erase the lines and make the sheet clean again, but Jesus Christ has taken away the handwriting **that was against us**, nailing it to His cross. Instead of our old, sin-worn and sin-marked selves, He proffers to each of us a new set, not the outcome of what we have been, **but the image of what He is and the prophecy of what we shall be!** By the great gift of holiness for the future by the impartation of His own life and spirit, **Jesus makes all things new.**”

Some were bad, very bad. Some were foul, extremely filthy. But those who receive that hope receive good for bad, and clean for foul. Even the most inveterately depraved were altered! **Such as these, some of ye were. But ye were washed, ye were sanctified, ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.** Hallelujah and amen.