

“Filling Up Christ’s Sufferings”
Colossians 1:24-2:5

February 9, 2014

SI: We’re studying Paul’s letter to the Colossians this winter. In my very first sermon in this series I said that one of the reasons we need to study Colossians is that it gives us a strong dose of Paul. And we can never get enough Paul.

All the authors of Scripture were inspired by God. But Paul was a man of uncommon intellectual brilliance and force. He was the Moses of the New Testament. More than any other New Testament writer, he has shaped our understanding and experience of the Christian life.

This passage is vintage Paul. It’s so deep, there’s so much here, we could spend weeks. We’re not, we’re going to keep moving through the letter. But we are going to focus most of our study on just one verse, verse 24.

INTRO: There are many images from September 11 that are unforgettable. One unforgettable image, captured in many photographs, and videos, was of office workers running out of the World Trade Center, and firefighters running in. Most people running out, but a few running in. During those actual moments, when we were watching it unfold on TV, no one knew what was going to happen. And more significantly, those firefighters did not know what was going to happen, but they knew their calling was not to run away from trouble, but to run towards it.

That's a picture of the Christian life—

We run towards trouble and suffering by the power of the Gospel and for the cause of Christ

It's not that we go looking for trouble, or that we seek out suffering—they come to us as we live in a fallen world.

But when they come, the Gospel gives us a way to face them, and run towards them, rather than run away.

That's what this passage is about.

It's always helpful to remember why Paul wrote this letter.

He did not plant the Colossian church. He had never visited it.

But the pastor who did plant it, Epaphras, came to see Paul in Rome (in prison), to get his advice about some teachings or ideas that were going around his church. Paul wrote this letter in response.

Bible scholars have called those teachings or ideas the Colossian heresy.

There have been lots of scholarly debates about the particular details of what was being taught or advocated. But the general outline is clear.

The Colossian heresy did not deny the need for faith in Christ alone to be saved.

It didn't say that you need faith in Christ plus good works to be saved.

The focus of the Colossian heresy was not on salvation, it was on the experience of the Christian life.

It taught that if you wanted to have a full Christian life—

an exciting, dynamic, fulfilling, authentic Christian life—

then you needed to move beyond basic Gospel and into the deeper things.

Repentance and faith in Christ are just the elementary ABCs.

They get you into the Christian life, but now you need something else to really progress and experience fullness.

There were apparently a number of paths and plans that were being advocated.
Some Jewish in origin—special diets to follow, and devotional schedules.
Some Greek—asceticism, rejection of the physical, also source of diet ideas.
Some Asian, the mystery religions—secret teaching, communication with angels.
In other words, the Colossian heresy pulled popular ideas from the culture
about what makes a good life, baptized those ideas with biblical terminology,
and then promoted them as the next big thing you need to get into if you want
fulfillment in Christian life.

So everything Paul writes, he does so with this context in mind.

The point he drives home over and over is that the Colossians already have
all they need for a full Christian life because they have the Gospel.
They don't need diets or schedules or angels or secret teachings or philosophies—
they need to take hold of the Good News of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ,
believe it and live it.

Now at this point in the letter, Paul gives them a little background about himself.

Remember, they had never met each other.
He wants them to know that he's for them, that they can trust him,
so he tells them he has suffered for them in his service as an Apostle.
His suffering and struggles are part of his credentials.

But there is a deeper reason Paul mentions his suffering.

As I said, he always has the Colossian heresy in mind.

He takes every opportunity to undermine it
and to show the Colossians that the Gospel is all they need.
And that's exactly what he does here.

He says: The Gospel has enabled me to run toward suffering, not run away from it.

And you have the same Gospel
Don't be deceived by fine-sounding arguments that promise fullness
through all these various schemes.
They won't help you when the rubber meets the road.

Three points: In the Gospel you have:

1. A purpose for your suffering.
2. A response to your suffering.
3. A help in your suffering.

MP#1 In the Gospel you have a purpose for your suffering.

As I said, we're going to focus mostly on verse 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.”

What does Paul mean when he says that in his flesh he is filling up what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions?

It's a daring way to speak, to suggest that something is lacking in Christ.

Of course, Paul isn't saying Christ's suffering on the cross was incomplete.

and that it is up to us, or up to really spiritual people like Paul, to finish it.

When Jesus said: It is finished, it was finished.

By his suffering he saved us completely, he reconciled us to God, he laid all his enemies in the dust, he secured our inheritance.

So if Christ's suffering on the cross is complete, what suffering of his is incomplete?

Paul says it is the suffering for the sake of his body, which is the church.

In other words, the cross was not the end of Jesus suffering.

Christ continues to suffer even now, even in heaven.

Even glorified, seated at his Father's right hand surrounded by holy angels.

Christ suffers when his body, the church suffers.

Remember what the risen Lord Jesus asked Paul when he struck him down with the light from heaven on the road to Damascus?

Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?

Paul wasn't persecuting Jesus, or at least he didn't think he was.

He was persecuting Christians. But Jesus said that was persecution of him.

Even though Jesus is risen and glorified, he feels the persecution of the church.

And it is through Christ's suffering in his body, the church, his kingdom spreads.

Read Granberry letter in bulletin: Eleven years on Yakama Reservation.

Letter filled with good things. But leaving youth ministry in Birmingham,

living amongst alcoholism, suicide, dependency, abuse, suffering, out of it church.

A more vivid example. There is a PCA missionary to Muslims, Bill N.

Recently in Bangladesh and the head of Campus Crusade showed him graphic photos of Crusade staff hacked to death with machetes by Islamic extremists.

More staff took their places. Christ's suffering in his body.

You have this teaching in various forms in the New Testament, that there must be tribulation and suffering on the part of the people of God, and that the Lord will not return until the full measure of that suffering has been completed. The church will continue to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings until the Gospel of the kingdom is preached through all the earth. Suffering for Christ is part of how the church hastens the coming of Christ. So this is the great purpose for your suffering—it strengthens the church, advances the kingdom of God, and hastens the coming of Christ.

But you might think your struggles and disappointments don't qualify.

You are not suffering on the mission field, or being martyred for sharing Christ. Your suffering is mundane. Your children are sick.

Your marriage is a disappointment. Or you're disappointed you aren't married.

Your business is struggling. You've lost your job.

You're hurting because of your own sinful and foolish decisions.

You might think that those sufferings don't count.

They don't have any grand purpose. They aren't advancing the kingdom of God.

But you're wrong. Everything you suffer as a Christian is part of this great purpose, because all suffering contributes to your maturity in Christ.

And there is nothing the kingdom of God needs more than maturity.

When your pain and disappointments contribute to your maturity in Christ, you become a proof of the Gospel. You become the presence of Christ in the world.

When you bear your sufferings with Christian grace and honor God in them, you are advancing his kingdom in one of the most powerful ways possible.

Rayburn put it this way:

No Christian makes a great impression on others for being happy and good when his or her life is blessed in every way: a good marriage, a happy home, healthy children, a good job, a large measure of this world's goods. But let a man or woman retain a Christian character, a cheerful spirit, a sense of holy purpose, a heart of gratitude when enduring great troubles, and his or her life becomes a window on the unseen world, an invisible but present Christ, and the power of divine grace to make God's salvation visible in an ordinary human life. "How does she do that?" the world is forced to ask; "How can he have such an attitude when so much has happened in his life?"

This week, as you face suffering, whatever it may be—big or small—no matter what the cause, circumstances of life in a fallen world, sins of other people, even your own sins and failures—

Remind yourself that the Lord has a purpose in them, the advance of his kingdom.

And out of that understanding of the purpose of your suffering will come a particular response. Brings to the second point

MP#2 In the Gospel you have a response to your suffering.

Most secular people respond to suffering by trying to fix it, avoid it, or cover it up by any means possible.

I saw a t-shirt that said: I used to care, now I take a pill for that.

That's the response—to use science, technology, entertainment, consumerism—anything that works to blunt the pain.

There is no reflection. No higher purpose.

Paul says that in the Gospel we have a different response—We rejoice.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you.

He also says this in Romans 5: We also rejoice in our sufferings.

And in Philippians 4, also written while in prison, Paul says:

Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, rejoice.

These are not trivial words from a man who never suffered.

There was a great deal of pain in Paul's life—pain of body and pain of heart.

He suffered exhaustion. He suffered loneliness.

He suffered acute disappointment.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12 that he had received countless beatings and that five times he was given 39 lashes by the Jews who were infuriated because of his preaching Christ. He was once stoned, once shipwrecked.

He was threatened many times with execution. That was his eventual fate.

He didn't smile his way through those things.

When he received the 39th lash, those five times at the hands of the Jews, he was either groaning or unconscious.

He didn't laugh when he heard friends like Demas had betrayed him—it felt like a kick in the gut.

His years in prison were very hard on a man as active as Paul.

He wasn't a Stoic. He felt things deeply.

But Paul perspective on his hard life was that it was his calling—and not only his calling but his privilege.

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ is the noblest thing a person can do—and that gave him reason to rejoice.

Do you remember what the Lord said at Paul's conversion?

He said: I will show him how much he must suffer for my sake.

The World War II generation is almost gone.
But did you ever notice, when you talked World War II veterans,
how vividly they remembered everything?
Compared to their long lives, those war years were just a blip.
Decades have passed. They've had rich experience of work and family.
But get them talking about the war, and it would all come back.

When Dick McCarty was still with us, Becky's father, he might have been
confused about recent events, but ask him about serving in the Pacific,
and off he would go, telling about this or that battle, this company, man.
It would all come back to him, he would even relive the emotions—
he would chuckle or weep depending on the story.

I once talked to a couple who were both WWII veterans.
They worked in Army intelligence, stationed in England. Where they met.
They had come back to America and had very successful careers.
But when they talked about the war, it was like the best time in their lives.
I asked them why, and they paused for a moment before answer, then said:

We were in a great cause with thousands of other people like us from all over the
free world. And even though we all weren't on the front lines, we were all willing
to die for the cause, and we worked hard to do our part.

They came home after the war and got married and had long, peaceful,
fulfilling lives without any great dangers. But they would not have given up
for a minute those short years of suffering and sacrifice, and the joy that came
from fighting for a great cause.

Well, the analogy is not perfect, but I think this is Paul's point.
You only have a few brief years to suffer for Jesus and his kingdom then war over.
In heaven there will be no sorrows to bear, no frustrations to patiently endure,
no fighting with sin out of love for Christ, no persecution as a badge of honor.

T
hat will all be over and you will obey God perfectly from your heart.
Now is the only time you have to suffer for Jesus' sake,
and to grow in maturity through suffering.
There is a joy in that. Not grinning and laughing and denying the pain—
but a sober rejoicing at this great struggle of the Christian life.
That bring us to the third point . . .

MP#3 In the Gospel you have a help in your suffering.

And that help is Jesus Christ, who by his incarnation and suffering, redeems your suffering, and gives you real comfort and hope that nothing else can.

Throughout this letter, and especially in these verses,

Paul says subtle things to undermine these ideas and teachings that were going around the Colossian church.

The way he does it is by stealing the popular terminology of each of these fads, and using their terms to point to Christ and the Gospel.

It's a way of saying, you don't need the spiritual snake oil these people are selling.

You have the real thing. Well, Paul just pulls out all the stops in these verses.

He probably had a good time doing this, chuckled to himself.

Vs. 25 he uses the term fullness. That was a biggie with these people.

I've presented the word of God to you in all its fullness.

You don't need the fullness they are promising—you have it in Christ.

Three times he uses the term mystery.

This was very important word in the mystery religions, popular Asian cults of the day, that said the way to the good life through secret knowledge.

That idea came into the church. Key is deep studies, learn secret things.

Paul says: You've got the greatest mystery, Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Then there is one more, in verse 28, where he speaks of presenting everyone perfect.

Scholars have pointed out that this is a term that the Greeks liked to use.

Their idea was the perfect man is a man who rises above the physical.

He is impervious to pain because lives in the realm of the mind, the ideal.

For the Greeks, the physical was weak, it was scorned.

That's why Paul says elsewhere that the cross was foolishness to the Greeks.

God taking on human flesh and dying on a cross was laughable.

This idea was coming into the church as well.

That they way to the perfect Christian life to rise above the physical.

Through philosophy, asceticism to deny the imperfections and pains of this life.

Paul says: No, no, no. I'm presenting you perfect in Christ.

The ideal life is not a life that denies imperfection and physical pain—

but one that enters into them and suffers them just as Jesus did.

Here is the great help in your suffering—

The eternal Son of God became a man at Christmas, a perfect man who suffered.

So in your suffering you can know him and know his heavenly Father.

Over Christmas, we asked prayer for Allison's high school friends the Gauleys.

Their son Sean was driving home from college, first semester of freshman year. He had a wreck on the interstate and was brought to UAB in a coma.

His parents, his two brothers came down from home in Kentucky and spent the whole month in the waiting room and ICU, until Sean finally passed away.

After his death, Allison wrote the Gauleys a poem.

She didn't want me to read this, but I begged her, because it tells so well how Jesus entered into this world of suffering to redeem it.

And we don't get comfort and help by trying to run away from the pain, but by running into it, because in that suffering is our incarnate Savior.

Bethlehem and Birmingham

Christmas 2013

(Luke 1, 2)

One month; one long, short month,
which the rest of the world called Christmas,
and did the usual.

We didn't.

This month; this long, short month,
the world might say we missed Christmas;
but,

We didn't.

If Christmas was a scared, young girl;
We trembled.

If Christmas was being overshadowed by a Will,
undeniable and devastating;
We were overshadowed.

If Christmas was a baby called Savior,
who only saves through brokenness;
We were broken.

If Christmas happened far from home,
far from the arms of yearned-for kin;
We yearned.

If Christmas was Mary pondering, trying to understand;
We cried out.

If Christmas was "a sword will pierce your side";
We ached.

If Christmas was a glimpse of the cross ahead,
of the broken, piercé body of a beloved son;
We glimpsed.

If Christmas promised a crown and David's throne *forever*,
a resurrection certainty;
We hope now like never before.

If Christmas was the tender care of Joseph,
doing all he could;
We had many Josephs.

If Christmas was angels singing "Glory!";
We heard them.

If Christmas was low shepherds and old Simeon
helping two parents with the world on their shoulders,
We were helped.

If Christmas was, "Fear not! Your Lord is here!"
We were not greatly shaken.

If Christmas was a Son,
the revealed face of the God of the Universe,
We said, "Let it be unto us according to your will,"
And bowed in Bethlehem and Birmingham.

Let's not be a church that ever gets caught up in spiritual novelties and fads,
the new and exciting teachings and practices that promise fullness,
mystery and perfection.

Because when buildings are burning and loved ones are laid low,
when the suffering of this old fallen world presses in on you—
there is but one help, Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.
He redeems your suffering and infuses it with higher purpose,
and in the hardest times, he enables you to rejoice.