

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ

Colossians 1:24 – 29

It may seem odd, having reminded the believers of the hope that they have laid up in heaven; having encouraged them that he, Paul, was praying for them so that they might walk worthy of this hope; having painted this great picture of the supremacy of Christ – the center of this hope – in all things and assured them of obtaining this hope if they continue steadfast in the faith; that he would follow with verse 24: *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church*, Colossians 1:24. At the very least it sounds suspiciously like a works-driven gospel that says Christ's suffering and death on the cross were not enough to really do the job and so he has asked Paul to finish it up. But rest assured, that is not what Paul is saying here. If we read through this section, and get an idea of what Paul is saying in brief, I think we can clarify what Paul means when he turns to talking about rejoicing in suffering and filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Essentially Paul tells us in verse 29 that he is working very hard at something – and that something is **proclaiming Christ to unbelievers and teaching Christ to believers** so that the lost would be saved and the believers would grow and his ministry might result in mature believers. What specifically he is preaching comes through in verses 26 – 27 as something that was once a mystery, a mystery once confined to the heart of God, but is now being proclaimed and made known among the nations; namely a gospel that says it is **Christ in us who is the hope of glory**. And it is this preaching and proclaiming of the gospel, a stewardship from God, Paul calls it, that causes the mystery to be unveiled and the word of God to be fully known on the earth. And so verse 24 says that this ministry, of **making the mystery of Christ and the hope of glory known on the earth** is carried out through suffering while rejoicing. That's how Paul gets to *'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...'*

The first thing we must understand about the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is **a call to a life of rejoicing in suffering for the sake of others**. Notice again what Paul says: *'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...'* The Christian life is neither a pain-free existence nor a joyless journey. The most joyful people in the world are those who have sold out to the gospel – the good news that it is Christ in you, the hope of glory – those who have chosen to die in order to live. But the some of the most profoundly unhappy people are those who choose the temporary pleasure of comfort and security over the sacrifice and suffering of following Christ to the cross in missions and ministry and evangelism and love labors. Oddly enough, that is a choice against joy – not for joy. Hebrews tells us that Christ chose to endure the cross – *'...for the joy set before Him...'* It is the road of suffering that brings joy.

And suffering is what Christ chose – it wasn't just a coincidence. Christ chose suffering firstly as the way to bring us to God, and then to perfect and mature us as the church. And He calls us through the gospel to the same road He traveled – to the cross. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer that said, *'When Christ calls a man, He bids Him come and die'*. Not the most appealing message to the world it would seem. But His words to His disciples are the same to us today. *'If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.'* Matthew 16:24-25 The gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to take up our cross and follow Him on the Calvary road – denying our impulse to comfort and ease, spending ourselves for the sake of others, sacrificing even security for the sake of making the nations glad in God. **And that brings joy.**

Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand spent 14 years in prison for preaching the gospel. Although his captors smashed four of his vertebrae and either cut or burned 18 holes in his body, they could not get him to recant. He testified, *"Alone in my cell, cold, hungry, and in rags, I danced for joy every night."* During this time he turned to a fellow prisoner, a man he had led to the Lord before they were arrested, and asked, *"Have you any resentment against me that I brought you to Christ?"* His response was immediate: *"I have no words to express my thankfulness that you brought me to the wonderful Savior. I would never have it another way."* **Christ suffered to bring us to God – our suffering is to bring Christ to the nations.**

Strangely, it is not in days filled with comfort and ease, when the sun is shining and everything seems to be going well that we enjoy the sweetest communion with God and the deepest joys of knowing Him. It is rather in those times of suffering and loss, when there is no fruit on the vine and no cattle in the stalls that Christ is experienced as our greatest treasure. We have the mistaken notion that suffering should be temporary, justified, and readily applicable to life. When in reality it is suffering that frees us from the deadly delights of sin and the powerful lure of worldly affections.

Malcolm Muggeridge, for years a confident atheist, who came to Christ late in life, once wrote: *Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness.* Malcolm Muggeridge,

And it is in our suffering for the sake of bringing the gospel to others that His suffering for our salvation is most clearly seen. I believe this is what Paul meant when he went on to say: '*...and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is, the church,* We need to understand firstly that when Paul says that he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions he is not saying that there was something deficient in what Jesus went through on the cross and has to somehow be made up through our suffering. What is lacking in Christ's afflictions has nothing to do with some kind of limitations on the efficacy of the work of Christ in salvation. That is to say, there was nothing deficient in the sacrifice of Jesus for us. The death of Christ for our redemption was complete and full – a once-for-all, never-to-be repeated redemptive work and we could never add anything to its worth. **Our suffering is not a repetition of Calvary – rather it is an extension of Calvary.**

The thing that is lacking is the proclamation of His afflictions for our sakes to all peoples. The message of the gospel – the suffering and death and resurrection of Jesus – is not yet seen and known to all peoples everywhere – therefore the lack. **The work of the cross is complete and lacks nothing but the personal presentation of the message to the nations of the world.** And the means God has chosen to do this is by calling you and I to present the afflictions of Christ and the work of the cross to those in the farthest corners of the world and to those as near as next door and to all the ones in between who do not know the infinite value of Christ.

But it is also a proclamation of His afflictions through our afflictions. Paul says, *in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.* In other words he saw in his real, in-the-flesh suffering for the sake of the gospel, a proclamation of the afflictions of Christ. I think this means that God intends that the afflictions of Christ are proclaimed to the world and are seen most clearly in the afflictions we endure and the way in which we endure them. His afflictions are filled up in ours because in our afflictions, the world sees His sacrifice for them. If we proclaim the cross of Christ, and yet it is not seen in our lives – how can that impact those we are trying to reach? I believe that we make the afflictions of Christ real to people when they see the mark of the cross on our lives. They see that we live a life denying our impulse to pad our nest, to maximize our comfort and minimize our risk. They see that we are not bent out of shape by adverse circumstances – they see that our joy is not dependent upon external devices – they watch as we sacrifice our money and our time for the sake of the gospel. And they begin to see the the infinite worth of the afflictions of Christ for their redemption.

Michael Card tells the story of Joseph, a Masai warrior who became one of those whose afflictions for the cause of Christ became a powerful testimony to the gospel. One day Joseph, who was walking along one of these hot, dirty African roads, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. Then and there he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The power of the Spirit began transforming his life; he was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was return to his own village and share that same Good News with the members of his local tribe. Joseph began going from door-to-door, telling everyone he met about the Cross of Jesus and the salvation it offered, expecting to see their faces light up the way his had. To his amazement the villagers not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush. Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a water hole, and there, after days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception he had received from people he had known all his life. He decided he must have left something out or told the story wrong.

After rehearsing the message he had first heard, he decided to go back and share his faith once more. Joseph limped into the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. "He died for you, so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God" he pleaded. Again he was grabbed by the men of the village and held while the women beat him reopening wounds that had just begun to heal. Once more they dragged him unconscious from the village and left him to die.

To have survived the first beating was truly remarkable. To live through the second was a miracle. Again, days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred—and determined to go back. He returned to the small village and this time, they attacked him before he had a chance to open his mouth. As they flogged him for the third and probably the last time, he again spoke to them of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him began to weep. This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ.

In our flesh we are filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body. And this is truly liberating and sustaining for our souls. It sustains us through times of trouble and heartache, giving us solid assurance of the sovereignty of God and His control over everything. And it liberates us from the tyranny of material possessions and the seduction of temporary delights.

And this suffering, Paul says, has a definite purpose. '*... for the sake of His body, that is, the church*'. Christ sacrificed all for the church Paul says in Ephesians 5:25: *Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her*', and we are not called to anything less. Are we willing to spend all we have and be spent in hardship and suffering to see the great purpose of God spread to all nations? **The only way to rejoicing through sufferings is to have this greater goal in view.** Armed with the clear conviction that our suffering is for the sake of His body, the church, and the spread of His kingdom, we can endure any hardship, weather any storm, overcome any obstacle.

The afflictions of Christ that we are making known now to the world, were on His part, for the creation of His Bride, the church – the object of Christ's affections. And it is through the church that the word of God is made known to the nations: '*...the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known*', Colossians 1:25 It is through the church of Christ that God has ordained the preaching of the gospel and it is through those individuals called saints who make up the church that the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. Don't get the idea that it is only the Pauls and Timothys and Billy Grahams of the world that are tasked with this work.

Paul says that the gospel is '*...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory*'. Colossians 1:26-27 Notice that it is through the saints that God has ordained that the riches of His glory are made known among the nations. That includes all of us – from the least to the greatest – from the newest babe in Christ to the oldest saint among us. We have all been given the mandate to go and make disciples. **We are all called to make known the mystery of the gospel – which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

The central element of the Good News, the core of the gospel, is that Christ, the visible image of the invisible God by whom, through whom and for whom all things came into being, the One who is before all things and in all things, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, the beginning, the firstborn of all creation, the One who has first place in everything, the One in whom everything holds together, who is the head of His body, the church – **this Christ dwells in the believer through the Holy Spirit**. This is the heart of the gospel – Christ in you, the hope of glory. Apart from Him indwelling us, we have no hope – just good wishes.

The Bible's definition of a Christian has little to do with good behavior or good intentions – a Christian, according to Scriptures – is a person in Christ – one in whom the living God dwells. Paul uses the phrase – 'in Christ' or its equivalent at least 172 times in his letters. And what this describes is a life lived wholly within the confines of the life of Christ. It is a life whose boundaries and limits are the limits of Christ Himself. It is a sphere of living that is circumferenced by Christ. **Everything about the Christian life is in Christ.** It is '*Him we proclaim*'. The gospel is all about proclaiming Christ. It is not first of all the proclamation of relief from guilt and the deceit of sin, or of a clean conscience and a better you, or healing for your marriage and family and restoration of broken relationships. **The proclamation of the gospel includes all these things but it is not about these things.** It is about Christ.

The work of the gospel is warning and teaching: '*...warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom*, Colossians 1:28a To warn everyone here means to warn those who are disobedient to the gospel that a life lived outside of Christ is ultimately vain and terminal. It is to warn them that they are missing out on the eternal joys of knowing Christ – wasting their lives with trivial pursuits and deadly addictions – settling for mud pies and collecting sea shells when so much more is offered. One of the marks of those who have been changed by the gospel is the evidence of a deep concern for unbelievers.

C.H. Spurgeon once wrote: *“Have you no wish for others to be saved? Then you are not saved yourself. Be sure of that.... The saving of souls, if a man has once gained love to perishing sinners and his blessed Master, will be... an all-absorbing passion to him. It will so carry him away, that he will almost forget himself in the saving of others..... If sinners will be damned, at least let them leap to hell over our bodies. And if they will perish, let them perish with our arms about their knees, imploring them to stay. If hell must be filled, at least let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions and let not one go there unwarned and unprayed for.”*

And teaching everyone here means that we are teaching those who believe to find their supreme joy and satisfaction in Christ and not in things or people. It means that we are discipling those who believe the message of the cross, teaching them that the Christian life is not about maximizing our pleasure and minimizing our risk.. It is teaching them that we are called to follow Jesus on the same Calvary road that beckons us to suffering. It is teaching them all our pain and all our joy is ordered by a loving Father to bring us to the place where God alone is our great joy and hope. It is teaching them to value Christ – the one who gives rather than run after all His gifts. It means that we are teaching them that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.

And the goal of the gospel then is to bring those who believe all the way through to maturity. '*...that we may present everyone mature in Christ*. Colossians 1:28b This was what Paul worked hard at: *For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me*. Colossians 1:29 And I believe Paul worked hard at this because he knew the depths of joy in filling up the afflictions of Christ in suffering. He knew the utter satisfaction of knowing the limitless Christ in all his life and desperately wanted others to have that joy.

Lamak was born into a wealthy and powerful Muslim family in Southeast Asia, but committed his life to Christ, while he was working in Singapore. When he went home 4 years later, Lamak took the risk of sharing Jesus with his family. His father-in-law was so enraged he had Lamak strapped to a chair, and used live electric wires to force him to renounce Jesus. But this young man refused to deny Christ. Today he has scars on his arms from the torture, but he uses these scars to share his testimony with other people. They ask Lamak about his scars, and he tells them about Jesus! He eventually helped plant 32 churches and had baptized 500 Muslim believers. Lamak has been rejoicing in suffering – filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body, the church.

Our gracious God and great Father,

Forgive us for making all Your good gifts a substitute for You. We are so prone to mistake the gifts for the Giver. Satisfy our souls with Yourself and break the tyranny of material possessions and the seduction of temporary delights. May we discover true joy in treasuring Christ above everything and find our greatest satisfaction in loving You and being loved by You. Let us labor and rejoice in suffering to lead as many as we can into this all-satisfying love. May the good news of the gospel sustain us through times of trouble and heartache, giving us solid assurance of Your sovereignty and complete control over everything. Grant that our lives would be spent in making the mystery of Christ and the hope of glory known on the earth, and living to make the nations glad in You, we pray in the precious name of our hope of glory, Jesus Christ, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto You.
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you
and give you peace.***