

Jesus, Our Joy in Suffering

PHBF 12.19.10

TEXT: Colossians 1:24-29

**Words for kids: suffering,

SERIES: Advent 2010 – The Glory of Jesus Christ

[Have group stand and recite Colossians 1:15-29.]

ILLUS: Labor Day weekend, 1979, with Hurricane David approaching – “To save the houseboat,” Phil told them, “anchor deep.”

This passage gives us three strong anchors for when the hurricane of suffering hits our little boat. It’s an appropriate text for Christmas because all three of these anchor points would give way except for the fact that God came into the world as a baby.

Because of Christmas...

- My suffering is not pointless.
- My suffering is not permanent.
- My suffering will not overwhelm me.

MY SUFFERING IS NOT POINTLESS. (vv 24-26)

Colossians 1:24-26 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, ²⁵ 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, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

There is no doubt that verse 24 is confusing. What does Paul mean when he says he fills up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? How can there be anything lacking in the sufferings of Christ?

Catholic interpretation takes this verse to mean that Christ’s passion can be supplemented in its atoning value by the sufferings of the saints. But we reject that interpretation, simply by considering other things Paul says right in this letter about the value and accomplishments of Jesus’ death:

Colossians 2:13-14 ¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him [Christ],

having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Whatever he does mean in verse 24, Paul certainly cannot be saying that his own sufferings add to the achievements of the cross. The lack Paul fills up has nothing to do with the value of Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross. In fact, the original word Paul uses for “afflictions” (“what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”) is never once used in the NT to refer to Jesus’ passion on the cross.

What is Paul referring to? He’s writing about the ongoing affliction suffered by Jesus’ body, the church, as we travel through this present, evil age. We must remember that we live in a fallen world. Suffering here is not the exception; it’s the norm. Furthermore, Jesus promised His followers would suffer: “In the world you will have tribulation” (Jn 16:33). So when Paul refers to “Christ’s afflictions,” he means the afflictions that befall the church. The church is the body of the crucified Messiah. She is destined to suffer as He did; and yet her afflictions are truly the afflictions of Christ, because Christ feels every blow that befalls His body here on earth.

The NLT express this interpretation well:

I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue for his body, the church.

The central point is clear: God’s people are going to suffer, and if Paul can take more of those sufferings upon himself on behalf of the church, he is glad to do it. 2 Cor 1:5-6 makes the same point:

2 Corinthians 1:6 *If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.*

Paul suffered in the interest of these people whom he loved, and he rejoiced in knowing that his sufferings would benefit them. He does not rejoice in the suffering for its own sake but rather for how it benefits them: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake” and “for the sake of his body, the church” (v 24).

Here's the significance of all this for us: Paul's suffering was not pointless. He saw a great purpose in it: "to make the word of God fully known" (v 25). He could rejoice in his suffering because he knew his suffering served a higher purpose. God was at work, using Paul's pain for their good.

Do you know this is true of your suffering as well, if you love God and know Jesus Christ as your Savior?

Romans 8:28-29 ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*

Your pain is not pointless. God is at work in every hurt, every disappointment, every deprivation, every loss. Sometimes He uses your suffering for your own gain—to teach you, humble you, make you grateful, give you perspective, or He uses your suffering for others' gain, as with Paul and his afflictions. Whichever the case, your suffering is not pointless. You may not understand all or even any of the reasons why in this life, but know this: God always has a purpose.

ILLUS: A legend says that Moses once sat near a well in meditation. A wayfarer stopped to drink from the well and when he did so his purse fell from his girdle into the sand. The man departed. Shortly afterwards another man passed near the well, saw the purse and picked it up. Later a third man stopped to assuage his thirst and went to sleep in the shadow of the well. Meanwhile, the first man had discovered that his purse was missing and assuming that he must have lost it at the well, returned, awoke the sleeper (who of course knew nothing) and demanded his money back. An argument followed, and irate, the first man slew the latter. Where upon Moses said to God, "You see, therefore men do not believe in you. There is too much evil and injustice in the world. Why should the first man have lost his purse and then become a murderer? Why should the second have gotten a purse full of gold without having worked for it? The third was completely innocent. Why was he slain?"

God answered, "For once and only once, I will give you an explanation. I cannot do it at every step. The first man was a thief's son. The purse contained money stolen by his father from the father of the second man, who finding the purse only found what was due him. The third was a murderer whose crime had never been revealed and who received from the first the punishment he deserved. In the future believe that there is sense and righteousness in what transpires even when you do not understand." (Richard Wurmbrand, *One Hundred Prison Meditations*)

Your suffering is not pointless.

MY SUFFERING IS NOT PERMANENT. (vv 27-28)

Colossians 1:27-28 ²⁷ *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.* ²⁸ *Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*

Notice the phrase "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v 27). Christ indwells by His Spirit all those who are His. It's a tremendous privilege with awesome implications for this life. But its significance extends well beyond this life into the age to come. "Christ in you" for the present promises you rich glory in the future: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." The Holy Spirit the down payment, the earnest money, your engagement ring from God that your wedding day is coming.

Verse 28 looks forward to the same glorious day—that great and final day of culmination when Paul presents his friends to Jesus and everyone there is finally made "mature in Christ." The word "mature" means "perfect, complete, finished" (cf. v 22 – "holy, blameless, above reproach"). It envisions a day when all of us will finally be the way we were intended to be—no more sorrow, no more sin, no more suffering. Only rich and lavish glory.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.* ¹⁷ *For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory*

beyond all comparison,¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Night never lasts. Sometimes it seems long, like daylight will never come, but the sun always rises. Someday, the first nanosecond after we cross over the river to heaven's shore, in that single instant all our suffering will be over. Imagine that day—free from pain, free from sorrow, free from every form of suffering such as illness, betrayal, poverty, rejection, depression, and guilt. All of it—gone, never to return. Picture the sights and sounds of heaven—the streets of gold, gates of pearl, tree of life, river of life, saints and angels, friends and loved ones, and most of all, your Savior, smiling and gathering you into His arms, finally home.

Let the vision of the seer help your imagination:

Revelation 21:1-5 *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." ⁵ And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."*

Take courage, friends. Your suffering is not permanent.

MY SUFFERING WILL NOT OVERWHELM ME. (v 29)

Colossians 1:29 *For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

How often have your worst fears kept you awake at night as you wonder what you would do if they ever came true? How many times have you heard a story of suffering and thought, "I could never handle

that. My faith, my courage, my joy isn't strong enough to deal with that"?

Mark this verse, and mark whose resources are on display. On the one hand, Paul says, "I toil." But on the other he says, "all his energy works within me." Literally, the clause reads: "His work works in me in power." The supply of power is God's, not Paul's. And since that is true, whatever suffering comes your way will not be too much for Him to handle.

ILLUS: Corrie ten Boom, talking to her father about her fear of what might happen to her if the Nazis took her. "When you take the train, do I give you the ticket three weeks ahead or do I give you the ticket when you get on the train?" he asked. "Right when I get on the train," she replied. "Well," he said, "God has a grace for you in your moment of need, and he will give it to you exactly when that moment comes."

What does all of this have to do with Christmas, the coming of Jesus into the world as a baby? Everything.

Christmas is our yearly reminder that God is so kind and so good, He didn't remain in heaven, aloof and distant from our suffering. Instead, He came into our world as an infant, personally entered into our suffering. He walked where we walk, felt the pain and confusion of life in a badly broken world.

Jesus came as a baby so He could deal with the suffering of all people everywhere. But in order to do that, He had to fix this world's brokenness at its very core. He had to deal with suffering, not just as a symptom of the deeper problem; He had to suffer as the solution to our greatest problem, the solution to all our problems. His death turned away the wrath of God and made it possible for the cause of all suffering to be eliminated.

Because of Christmas, because He suffered in your place,

- your suffering is not pointless,
- your suffering is not permanent, and
- your suffering will not overwhelm you.

[appeal to lost: admit sin, believe]

[Transition into Lord's Supper]

[Pray for Bill Trefts, generally for any who indicate need]

[Offering, then closing song.]

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