

## Lesson 4

# Joy in Suffering

## *Colossians 1:24*

### Introduction

Paul has just finished up one of the most significant treatises in Christianity regarding the doctrine of who Jesus is. Jesus was fully God and human at the same time. He ranks over all creation because He is the creator of all things. He ranks over the church because He is the founder and life giver of the church. This was all for our redemption through His blood shed on the cross.

The effects of our redemption are amazing. By the power of Jesus Himself, we have gone from a state of *alienation, hostility, and evil* to that of *holiness and blamelessness*, where no accusation can be made against us. This amazing fact brings the highest responsibility to our life: continuity in the gospel delivered once and for all by the Spirit, preached by the apostles.

Because of these facts, Paul embraced his mission as an apostle. The task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles was the driving force behind everything in his life. Much suffering accompanied this. Paul was writing this epistle from a prison cell, 4:10. The details of his sufferings are made known in other writings, with 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 being one of the most detailed.

Despite all these things, Paul *rejoiced* in his work. Even though the job was often grueling and mentally / emotionally taxing, Paul moved with an energy and power that he knew was supplied by Jesus Himself, 1:29.

### Ministry and Suffering

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for his body, that is, the church (Colossians 1:24).

As Paul writes this letter, he is likely in a prison cell inside Ephesus or Rome. He communicates that the suffering he is experiencing is ongoing. Reading through the New Testament, this is likely the case.

Besides what is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 11, we read of:

- Verbal abuse: Acts 13:45; 14:2; 17:13; 18:6; 19:9.
- False allegations: Acts 18:12-13; 21:27-29.
- Being run out of cities: Acts 13:50.
- Assaults on his life: Acts 14:5-6.
- Beatings: Acts 21:32.
- Betrayal: 2 Timothy 1:15; 4:16.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> McKnight, *The Letter to the Colossians...*, p. 185.

During this, Paul disciplined his thoughts, remembering the purpose for it all and that he could serve others through suffering. *I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake*, Colossians 1:24a. In his final letter to Timothy, he writes:

Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore, I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us;

– 2 Timothy 2:8-12

## How can suffering be a cause for joy?

### Suffering draws us closer to Christ.

When *we* suffer, our degree of understanding of what Jesus went through in *His* suffering helps us to better relate to Him. It draws us closer to Him.

### Suffering helps us to focus on the reward.

When we experience trials and anguish, our focus on the world to come is sharpened. This world is not our home. *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*, 2 Corinthians 4:17.

### Suffering can lead to the salvation of others.

Philippians was also written during a time of imprisonment for Paul, and notice how he frames the situation:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

– Philippians 1:12-14

Many in the imperial guard may have never heard of the gospel had it not been for Paul. Many would have never been confronted with the gospel message of joy and reconciliation if he had not suffered. It was in the context of suffering and rejection that Peter wrote:

but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

– 1 Peter 3:15-16

Christian history is filled with accounts of the lost coming to Christ after witnessing the sufferings and martyrdom of the saints.

At its most basic level, we can safely say Paul welcomed suffering because he saw it as an unavoidable consequence of preaching the gospel. Another premise of suffering is that it represents the path of Christ - a demonstration we are walking even as He walked (Matthew 10:38, 1 John 2:6).

## **1:24b – Filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions...**

What does this statement mean? Paul was receiving persecution that was intended for Christ. Paul focused on the church as the body, thus embodying Jesus. Paul envisioned the need for additional suffering for the Body of Christ to endure, and he will endure it in his body.

See also 2 Corinthians 1:5 and Galatians 6:17.

### **What does this Mean for Us?**

As Christians, embracing Christ's identity and role in our lives is essential. Understanding that Jesus is both fully God and fully human should deepen our reverence and commitment to Him. Recognizing Jesus' sovereignty over all creation and the church reminds us that He is our life source, guiding us through every aspect of our existence. Appreciating the impact of our redemption, we realize that we have been transformed from a state of alienation and hostility to one of holiness and blamelessness.

Continuity in the gospel is paramount. The gospel, delivered once and for all, must be our steadfast foundation. We should continuously immerse ourselves in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, allowing the gospel's truth to permeate every aspect of our lives and influence our decisions, actions, and interactions with others.

Embracing suffering as part of the Christian journey is crucial. Suffering for Christ is not in vain; it is part of our calling and a way to identify with Jesus' sufferings. Like Paul, we can find joy in suffering because it brings us closer to Christ, helps us focus on our eternal reward, and can lead to the salvation of others.

Maintaining mental and emotional discipline is vital during trials. We must train our minds to focus on the purpose behind our suffering, remembering that it serves the greater good and can be a powerful witness to others. Enduring hardships with the knowledge that God's word is not bound allows us to remain faithful to our calling and trust in God's strength to sustain us.

Our sufferings can serve as a witness to others. By demonstrating how our faith remains unshaken despite trials, we can inspire others to trust in God. When defending our faith, we should do so with gentleness and respect, maintaining a good conscience so that our integrity shines through even in difficult times.

Another critical aspect is understanding that we share in Christ's sufferings. As members of the body of Christ, this fellowship in suffering is a mark of true discipleship. Our endurance in suffering can strengthen and encourage the entire body of Christ, contributing to the church's resilience and growth.

Lastly, maintaining an eternal perspective is essential. Keeping our eyes on the eternal reward reminds us that our current afflictions are temporary and are preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Living with the awareness that this world is not our home shapes our priorities and actions, reminding us that our ultimate destination is with Christ in eternity.

Integrating these principles into our lives can transform our Christian walk. Embracing our identity in Christ, remaining steadfast in the gospel, finding joy in suffering, disciplining our minds and hearts,

witnessing boldly, sharing in Christ's sufferings, and keeping an eternal perspective will help us live out the high calling of our redemption and impact the world for Christ.

## **For Discussion**

1. How does recognizing Jesus as fully God and fully human impact your daily faith and relationship with Him?
2. What practical ways can you acknowledge and submit to Jesus' sovereignty over your life and the church?
3. In what ways have you experienced transformation in your life since embracing redemption through Jesus' sacrifice?
4. How can we remain steadfast in the gospel amid the challenges and distractions of modern life?
5. How can we find joy in suffering as Paul did? Share a personal experience where suffering led you closer to Christ.
6. What strategies can we use to maintain mental and emotional discipline during times of trial and suffering?
7. Have you ever had the opportunity to witness to others through your suffering? How did it impact those around you?
8. How can understanding our shared sufferings with Christ and other believers strengthen our faith and community?
9. What practices help us maintain an eternal perspective daily, especially during hardship?
10. What lessons from Paul's life and ministry can we apply to our personal journey of faith and service?