

## **'I rejoice in my sufferings'**

Good morning. I have been asked to speak this morning on Colossians 1:24-2:5 as you continue your journey through the book of Colossians which began last week - so let's turn there:

<sup>1:24</sup>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, <sup>25</sup>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, <sup>26</sup>the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

<sup>2:1</sup>For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, <sup>2</sup>that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, <sup>3</sup>in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. <sup>4</sup>I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. <sup>5</sup>For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

This passage contains an enormous challenge and a huge, life-changing possibility and I want to address both of those this morning. The challenge comes first.

I have to admit that I find this quite a tricky passage of scripture. I find it tricky because I like being comfortable. I like security. I like minimizing pain. I like things to fit into my nice, comfortable plan. I like things to be convenient. And so I find this passage difficult because in it, Paul displays a completely different attitude, and I think God calls us to have that same attitude.

So this morning, I want to look at this passage by asking two questions:

1. What are Paul's sufferings?
2. Why is Paul suffering?

### **What are Paul's sufferings?**

Paul says that he is suffering, being afflicted, struggling. He says he has a great struggle, that he struggles with all God's energy that God powerfully works within him. He says he suffers for the sake of the Colossians.

How? What kind of suffering and struggle are we talking about there?

In 2 Corinthians 11, he tells us that he has suffered imprisonments, countless beatings, and has often been near death, and then goes on to say this:

<sup>24</sup>Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup>Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup>on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; <sup>27</sup>in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup>And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.<sup>2</sup>

Paul suffers physically - at the hands of others and in the risks he faces on his travels - and emotionally because of his anxiety for the churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 1:24-2:5 (ESV).

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 (ESV).

And that's difficult for many Christians, because we want to say, 'Why would God let his children suffer? If Paul really loved Jesus, surely he should be spared all suffering! Psalm 37:25 says, "I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread"; surely Paul should have plenty and not be in need!'

And yet, here it is, black on white: Paul suffers.

Why?

## Why is Paul suffering?

I want to give two answers to the question of why Paul is suffering:

### 1. Paul is suffering in order to achieve a goal.

Paul says, '...in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'.

This is a difficult verse, because it seems to say that in some way, Christ's afflictions were insufficient. What are we meant to do with that? Jesus himself said on the cross, 'It is finished.'<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:14 says, 'For by *a single offering* he *has perfected* for all time those who are being sanctified.'<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2: 'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.'<sup>5</sup> And we could continue. For example, a large part of Romans is taken up with showing that salvation is given simply in exchange for our trust in Christ.

So in what sense were Christ's afflictions *insufficient*? Insufficient *for what*? Well, they were *not* insufficient to obtain righteousness for us from the Father. We can't add anything to his afflictions in that sense. His sacrifice was perfect and complete. There's nothing lacking.

Let's look again at what Paul says:

<sup>1:24</sup>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*, <sup>25</sup>[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*, <sup>26</sup>the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

The sufferings that the apostle endures are for the sake of the church. He suffers to make the word of God fully known. And he continues like this:

<sup>27</sup>To [the saints] 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.

There is mystery, he says, which was hidden for ages and generations but which is now revealed to his saints - and it's this: Christ in you, the hope of glory. Now, bear in mind that what he means by this is 'Christ in *you Gentiles*' - you *non-Jews*. The mystery, the thing which no one knew until Christ died and rose again, was that God's plan for salvation was not for the Jews only, but for *all* who believe - for all of us gathered here this morning who do not belong, as a matter of birth, to the Jewish people.

<sup>28</sup>Him [ie Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

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<sup>3</sup> John 19:30 (ESV).

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 10:14 (ESV).

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2 (ESV).

Paul suffers, struggles, toils, to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that all the people reached may be presented mature in Christ.

So we see that Paul's suffering is in order to make Christ known among the lost. He endures whippings and beatings and shipwrecks and persecution and treachery and sleeplessness and hunger and thirst for this one reason: to make the sufferings of Jesus Christ known, and the enormous hope that we have if we will trust that Jesus' sacrifice has bought us righteousness in the sight of God the Father.

And I think it's in that sense that Jesus' afflictions were not complete: not everyone knew about them once they'd happened, not everyone knew the good news: that we, being lost in our own sin, unable to save ourselves, slaves to sin, could be saved from that enslavement and from the wrath of God because God himself had paid the price. So Paul puts himself through whatever it takes to take that Gospel message to the world.

And that Gospel message is so precious to Paul. I said I wanted to name two reasons why Paul suffers. The first is that he suffers in order to bring the Gospel to the world. The second reason is that the Gospel is precious to him.

## **2. Paul is suffering because the Gospel is precious to him**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul spends the best part of three chapters setting out our sinfulness: that none of us is born loving God, wanting to glorify him, and that we have exchanged his glory for other things - that we have treasured his glory less than other things, trampled it in the dirt, because that is our nature, and there is *nothing* we can do about it. We can never, ever earn righteousness in the sight of God. It's too late for that.

And then, in Romans 4, he says:

<sup>2</sup>...if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." <sup>4</sup>Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup>And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, <sup>6</sup>just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

<sup>7</sup>"Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,  
and whose sins are covered;

<sup>8</sup>blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."<sup>6</sup>

Abraham was given a gift when he believed God's promise: God gave him righteousness. It wasn't a wage, something he had earned. It was a gift. And David experienced the same thing: the righteousness of God given to an undeserving sinner. It's there throughout the Old Testament - it's in the Psalms, in the Prophets, in the Law, it's there, and Paul sees this, and so he says that in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, not to condemn you, as Martin Luther originally feared, but to *save* you. God, seeing my unrighteousness - and yours, that all that comes from me is faithless unrighteousness, manifests his *own* righteousness. *He* steps forward and says: you will have *My* righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. This is the gospel: if you believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and you trust in his sacrifice on the cross for your salvation, you will receive forgiveness from and justification before God. But more: you will receive Jesus himself.

John Piper says:

Forgiveness of sins and justification are good news because they remove obstacles to the only lasting, all-satisfying source of joy: Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is not merely the means of our rescue from

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:2-8 (ESV).

damnation; he is the goal of our salvation. If he is not satisfying to be with, there is no salvation. He is not merely the rope that pulls us from the threatening waves; he is the solid beach under our feet, and the air in our lungs, and the beat of our heart, and the warm sun on our skin, and the song in our ears, and the arms of our beloved...

The gospel is the good news that the everlasting and ever-increasing joy of the never-boring, ever-satisfying Christ is ours freely and eternally by faith in the sin-forgiving death and hope-giving resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

Colossians 1:24-2:5 brings us a challenge: to proclaim the Gospel to those around us at our own expense - yes, even to suffer for it. To move away from, 'Oh, but it's uncomfortable. Oh, but I'm fearful. Oh, I'm scared of suffering. I don't want to be rejected. I don't want to be persecuted. I don't want to be the weird one. I don't want to lose friends if sharing the Gospel means they'll abandon me.'

Those are real things. They're real. But the challenge isn't to rise to a cold, heartless duty - to suffer and find no joy. Paul doesn't say, 'And I don't care about my suffering. I don't care if I'm abandoned.' Of course he cares. That's why he talks about being abandoned in some of his letters. But he's found something that makes it worthwhile. He's found Jesus. He's found that he was made to worship God, and that God has made a way for him to come to the Father, and he's found *joy* in him. His suffering isn't cold duty; his suffering is because it is his *delight* to make Jesus' name known, because there is no one better, more satisfying, more delightful.

Perhaps some of you don't really experience much joy. Perhaps the idea of Jesus being your greatest joy is strange and alien to you. But what Paul is saying is that Jesus is so precious to him that he finds joy even in suffering for Jesus' sake. And that means he's found someone so much greater than himself, so much more joy-giving and more fulfilling than anything the world can offer, that he will do the one thing the world tells us is the worst thing that can happen: he will suffer, even die - because he has Jesus, in all eternity. And so he says to Timothy,

<sup>6</sup>... I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. <sup>7</sup>I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. <sup>8</sup>Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.<sup>8</sup>

Paul has loved Jesus' appearing, and he knows that whatever he suffers on earth, there awaits him now a crown of righteousness. And the same is true for us.

So the challenge of this passage is not simply to be willing to undergo suffering for the sake of the Gospel. It's to know Jesus Christ and discover such joy in him that suffering becomes meaningful.

I leave you therefore with one last question: what can we do if our joy in Christ is small? That's the subject for a whole book. And really, we also need to talk about why joy in Christ is a non-negotiable part of being a Christian, too - and there just isn't time. So I'm going to make two recommendations.

1. Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit<sup>9</sup> - and that fruit is borne when we walk by the Spirit,<sup>10</sup> and I think, from Galatians 3, that it's pretty clear that 'walking by the Spirit' means hearing the Word of

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<sup>7</sup> John Piper, 'What Is the Christian Gospel?' <<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-the-christian-gospel>>

<sup>8</sup> 2 Timothy 4:6-8 (ESV).

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 5:22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 5:16.

God with faith, and acting upon it. So if we want to grow in joy, we should be praying for greater faith, and daring to step out when we know the Bible or the Holy Spirit prompts us to.

2. I quoted from John Piper earlier, and that's because he is the man who has had the most profound impact on me in this area - and he's written a book called, 'When I Don't Desire God - How to Fight for Joy'. You could buy that. Or you could look up on the Web the words, 'how to fight for joy' - and you'll find some excellent teaching from Piper on exactly that.

Don't leave yourself satisfied with a version of Christianity which is joyless. It was joy in Christ that drove Paul - and he wanted others to know how precious Jesus is, and how great is the joy of knowing him, and having him, and being his.