

Colossians 1:24-26

“The Fruitfulness of Christian Suffering”

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Epiphany Season

Last Sunday, in our ongoing series on Hebrews, we covered Hebrews 11:23-27, which describes, among other things, the way in which Moses is commended for his faith because of how he “considered the reproach of Christ [that is, suffering in union with Jesus] greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt.”

This topic of suffering as a Christian, or suffering with Christ is a rich one in the New Testament, and it seemed to me to be wise to me this Sunday to step out of our ongoing sermon series and continue to build on what the New Testament teaches about suffering, and particularly the fruitfulness of our suffering as Christians in union with Jesus by considering with you the words of the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:24-26, which is our sermon text today.

I encourage you now to listen again closely and carefully to the word of God, as Paul teaches us what he understands about the fruitfulness of his own suffering and gives us a paradigm to understand the meaning and the value of the suffering we bear as well. This text is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you’d like to follow along there.

Paul writes to to the church in Colossae from a prison cell, and he says this:

*“[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.”*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Each of us, if we have lived any length of time at all, know what it is to experience suffering.

For some of us, the suffering we experience most acutely is in our bodies — whether it's chronic pain, a physical handicap, a wasting disease, or some other malady that is unhealable, even in our modern world.

Some of us experience the suffering of relational estrangement - we carry the pain of abandonment and betrayal by a spouse, the agony of being disowned by our parents or rejected by our children, the experience of being let down or stabbed in the back by mentors or friends we once thought were certain and strong, or simply the haunting loneliness that comes when we find ourselves alone far more often than we would wish.

Some of us experience suffering in our vocations, in our finances, in our aspirations - in desires that we long to be fulfilled that simply don't come to pass.

Some of us know what may be the worst kind of affliction of all — helplessly watching the difficulty and struggle of someone we love, whether a child or a parent or a friend — powerless to deliver or heal or fundamentally help them in their pain.

And all of us know the suffering of death — the lives, the people, the loves taken from us who are left behind, and the certainty that everyone we know and love, including ourselves, will one day die. Even in our modern society, with all of our wealth and our technology and our scientific knowledge, each of us knows what it is to suffer.

And one of the most difficult challenges inherent in the experience of suffering is its apparent meaninglessness.

If only we could connect the dots, we think, if only we could understand, *then* we might endure.

But, as the story of Job reminds us, that kind of total and comprehensive understanding of suffering is simply beyond our capability as creatures to grasp. We will not receive answers to all the questions we ask in this life.

But the Bible does give us some answers regarding the meaning of suffering, particular the meaning of suffering for Christians.

One of the things the bible teaches regarding the suffering that Christians experience is that God will use the trials in our lives to bring about our maturity and growth in Christ.

That's the kind of thing James means in his epistle, where he writes: *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."*

Often, this meaning of Christian suffering — the reality that God has promised to use the things we suffering to make us mature in Christ - is the one that we emphasize, sometimes almost to the exclusion of all other meanings.

But our personal maturity is not the only meaning that the Scriptures give for the experience of suffering as a Christian person, and it is not the primary meaning that Paul gives for his own suffering here in our text this morning.

Paul tells the Colossians in verses 24 and 25: “[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.”

In this text, Paul gives us two basic reasons that he finds meaning in his suffering - first, that he believes his suffering is part of what he describes as “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the church,” and second, that he trusts his sufferings are part of the process of “making the word of God fully known” - both for the Colossians, and for others.

But what in the world does Paul mean by describing himself as “filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ”?

We should be first be clear on what Paul does NOT mean by this statement.

By saying he is filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, Paul is not saying that he is adding to the work of Christ’s death as the decisive and sole sacrifice for sins. No Christ died “once for all,” as Paul puts it in Romans. Christ’s death doesn’t need to be improved upon in any way in terms of its full atonement for our sins.

So if that’s not what Paul means, then what does he mean?

I think the best way to understand that question is by looking at a passage in Philippians where Paul uses very similar language to the language he uses here.

One of the reasons for the epistle of Philippians is that it is a kind of thank you letter written by Paul from prison in Rome to the church in Philippi.

You see prison life in ancient Rome was very different than life in modern prisons.

In modern prisons the state takes nominal responsibility for your physical needs, but in the ancient world, nothing like that existed — if you were in Roman prison, you were totally dependent on the help of others — if you didn't receive food and blankets and clothing from someone outside of prison, you would die. To be confined to a Roman prison as you await your trial meant to be totally dependent on the charity of others.

But the Philippian church had taken up a collection of funds for Paul's needs, and had sent one of own members, Epaphroditus, to bring it to Paul in Rome where he is imprisoned. And now Paul sends them a thank you letter in return.

In the second half of Philippians 2, when Paul is commending the work of Epaphroditus, who brought the gift to him, and he tells the Philippians that Epaphroditus "risked his life to complete [or literally in the Greek to 'fill up' - the same word used in Colossians 1] what was lacking in your service to me."

Now what was lacking in the Philippians' service to Paul? What did Epaphroditus need to do to "fill up" their service to Paul?

They had sacrificially given money to provide for Paul's welfare. Their hearts were full of good intentions toward him. Presumably they were praying for Paul.

But still, one thing remained — they couldn't just go down to the western union office and wire the money to him — someone had to actually *take* the gift to Paul — and by doing so, Epaphroditus completed, or filled up, what was lacking in their service.

This then is the sense in which Paul seems to mean that his own suffering he is *“filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ”* for the sake of the church — as he suffers in his own body, he is making the sufferings of Christ fruitful for the church in his time — or as he puts in later in the passage, in his own suffering he is making the word of God (that is, Christ himself) known.

That is - Paul believes that his suffering is one of the means by which the Holy Spirit will cause Christ's suffering to bear fruit in those around him.

In other words, Paul seems to be saying two primary things in this passage about the meaning of his own suffering, and Christian suffering in general.

First, he is saying that he actually rejoices in his suffering because he sees his suffering as connected directly in some real way to the sufferings of Christ. Jesus' suffering and his suffering are connected.

And second, he is saying that he rejoices in his sufferings because understands that his suffering will bear fruit in the lives of others - he believes that what he suffers is actually part of the process of making the word of God more fully known in the world.

So, to answer the question we began with — what is the meaning of Christian suffering?

We say that from this text that these two realities - 1) that in our suffering we share in the sufferings of Christ, and 2) our suffering as Christian actually bears fruit in the lives of others, in the lives of those around us — and this also is part of the meaning of Christian suffering.

So what does this mean for us? How do we apply this text in our lives?

I want to offer two points along those lines.

**First, this text reveals that each of us is actually already the recipient of the fruitful suffering of others — and often in ways they could not have anticipated at the time.**

I'm not sure that the reality that we are each ourselves the recipients of the faithful and fruitful suffering of others is something we consider very often.

To take a very obvious example, consider this question — if Paul had not been arrested and imprisoned, if he had not spent years constrained and suffering behind prison walls, would we have the benefit of the New Testament that we have today?

The answer is simple — of course not. At least four of Paul's letters; Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon - and probably others, were all written while he was imprisoned, and the arguments and even the very existence of those letters are directly connected to Paul's suffering.

If Paul had not suffered in this way, these letters wouldn't exist for us today in the form that they do.

If Paul had not been in prison and heard about a new, dangerous teaching in Colossae, what would he have done?

It is not at all clear that he would have written a letter. Perhaps he would have traveled in person to minister to the church in Colossae and not written a letter at all, in which case, the part of the New Testament we know as "Colossians" wouldn't exist.

Or perhaps he would have written a letter, but that letter would have been quite different, because he would not have been forced to reflect in the same way on the meaning of his own sufferings and how they related to the sufferings of Christ and the health of the Colossians.

In any case, the point is this — we ourselves are the recipients of the fruits of Paul's own sufferings, and we are the recipients of these fruits in ways that Paul almost certainly couldn't have fully anticipated at the time.

And this reality, that we are the recipients always of the fruits of the faithful suffering of others is true for each of us in a million different ways.

Think for a moment, of the faithful Christian suffering that you have witnessed in the lives of others — and has, in turn, borne fruit in your life.

Perhaps it was a parent or a grandparent that you realize now had a pretty difficult marriage, but he or she persevered and continued on and your life now bears the fruit of their faithfulness.

Perhaps it was a friend or a family member that you witnessed bearing up under serious sickness or chronic pain, and endured all those things with faith and hope and courage, and provided for you a living demonstration of the rich blessing that comes to those who are steadfast under trial, so that you yourself would learn what it means to have faith and hope and courage in your suffering.

Perhaps it was fellow church member who you saw betrayed and mistreated by others but bore all of that with peace and calmness and refused to give in to bitterness or revenge - showing you, in a way that you couldn't have really understood any other way, what it means to suffer with Jesus and after the pattern of Jesus, what it means to be slandered without offering slander in return, what it means to be mistreated and betrayed without giving yourself over to revenge, to suffer all kinds of disappointments and attacks from others while still entrusting yourself to God.

All of us, without question, are marked by the fruit of the faithful Christian suffering of those saints whom we know and love. It is a holy thing to receive the fruit of another's suffering. And we should be thankful for it.



**But this text doesn't only shows us that we are each, ourselves, the recipient of the fruitful suffering of others — it also show us that we are called, like Paul, to understand our own sufferings to be connected to the sufferings of Christ, and to offer our sufferings up to God, trusting that he will make them fruitful in the lives of others.**

Have you ever considered understanding your particular suffering as a vocation - as a calling, as something you offer up to God in faith, trusting that he will use it to bear fruit in the lives of others?

I believe that understanding our suffering in this way is one of the deepest answers the Scriptures give us for why we bear the things we do.

In other words, the Scriptures as a whole, and this text in particular teaches us that for the Christian, suffering is not a curse from God's hand, but rather suffering as a Christian is actually a holy vocation — a calling from God to share in the sufferings of Christ and to offer our suffering up to our Father, trusting that he will make them fruitful.

What else than this does Paul mean in 2 Timothy 2, which we heard already this morning, where he writes first to Timothy these words: "Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus," and then, reflecting on his own experience says, "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."

According to Paul, suffering is a calling, it's something we share in with Christ as his good soldier, and he understands himself to endure everything he endures for the sake of others who belong to Jesus, that they also might receive all the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Indeed, as Paul says in our text this morning from Colossians, he rejoices in his suffering because it is filling up what is lack in the afflictions of Christ - his sufferings are bringing the work of Christ to bear on the lives of others, he understands that God is using his experience of suffering to bear fruit in the lives of the Colossians and the church in general.

In this statement, this idea that God uses the sufferings of his people to bring fruit in the lives of others, Paul is merely echoing the sentiment expressed by Joseph when he told his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Joseph tells his brothers that God has used his suffering for good — but for whose good was it? Not Joseph’s, at least not primarily.

God used using the suffering of Joseph for the good of others — his suffering, which he bore in his own body, in the years of slavery and prison and loneliness and isolation, bears fruit in the lives of others - it bears fruit in his family, in the court of Egypt, indeed, in the lives of all the people who dwelt in the land around him.

And in this, Paul and Joseph are merely echoing the teaching of Jesus himself, who told his disciples after he had gone up to Jerusalem, *“Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”*

Jesus is not simply talking about his own death here, he is talking about the mysterious principle by which God brings life to this broken world—which is that God has promised to act by his Holy Spirit to bring life and fruit specifically through the suffering of his people - Jesus is the model, but we take up our cross and follow in his way.

Now I can't pretend to know all of the details of whatever it is that you're suffering this morning. I know some of it. But not all of it. I think none of us can ever really know fully, what another person suffers. But God knows.

He knows all of it.

Beloved, whatever your suffering is this morning, be sure of this—God sees your suffering. He knows what you suffer. And God does not only see it and know it, he promises not to waste it.

Your own personal suffering, that you may think is hidden and meaningless — Your suffering will not be forgotten, and it will not be wasted.

And God this morning invites you to offer that suffering up to him, to understand your suffering to be connected to the sufferings of Christ, to believe that your suffering will be fruitful, that it will even, somehow and in some way, perhaps in some mysterious way known only to God himself, be used to continue to further the work of filling up for others what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ himself.

In other words, God invites you this morning to offer your suffering to him, trusting that he will use your suffering, probably in ways you cannot even imagine, to do the Spirit's work of making the afflictions of Christ fruitful in the concrete realities of this world.

Because, if you are in Christ, none of your suffering is wasted.

All of it matters. He will lose none of it — and he will use it all as a part of his own great work, which is to reconcile all things back to himself.

For our Lord has made us this promise, and it is one we must cling to if we are to understand what it means to suffer with him: *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.