

We are finishing the first chapter today, but don't get too excited, Paul actually gets more powerfully offensive as we move forward.

Today we are going to talk about suffering. And suffering is a difficult topic because we have all been taught different things about what suffering means, and it causes us to come to the text with a skewed view.

First, there are those that have been taught that becoming a Christian means that we will no longer suffer. That suffering is a thing to be avoided at all costs. That being part of God's team means that we have guardian angels floating around us at all times deflecting any negative aspects in our life. Almost like personal bodyguards that are there specifically to make sure that nothing ever causes us any harm. Of course, in the real world, suffering happens. And so in this belief structure it has to be passed off as self-inflicted, as in, this happened to you because you did this (and so suffering is always attached to fear). OR it is somehow that something is more powerful than God. Somehow the baddies snuck one through the defense. You have a defective guardian angel. That is a dangerous way to view suffering. The Bible makes it clear to us that suffering is part of the Christians life:

for it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake

A second way to view it understands that we must suffer for God, and end up making suffering a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, going out seeking suffering. Trying to find the places and situations in which ridicule and attack will be the most harsh, believing that greater suffering = greater Christian. At its furthest extreme are people who actually flog themselves in order to suffer with Christ. This defiles the Biblical idea of suffering. The suffering that Paul talks about is not a self-imposed or glorified suffering. It is a very real, deep painful

suffering. It means having to put up with something that you would rather not have to deal with.

So we can't avoid it, and we shouldn't go seeking it, but the third view of suffering is the one that the majority of us have been faced with and possibly struggle with. That is the view that we are not allowed to suffer because of how much we have been blessed. Or to put it another way (and the way that it has been most often said to me, AND I have said it to others): *As a twentieth century American, you can't understand what suffering really is.* And there is some truth to this, we will never experience the kind of suffering that people in other time periods and parts of the world do, but this does not mean that we aren't allowed to suffer.

It is similar to the way that we tell kids in Junior High and High School that their problems aren't real problems. They just got rejected, or stabbed in the back by a friend, or cut from the team, and we tell them, when you grow up this little bump in the road won't mean anything at all. I mean, they are just adolescents, their lives are driven by hormones and emotions, they need things to be put in perspective. But sometimes perspective isn't really helpful. Because what that kid is experiencing is very real to them. They don't have the ability to just grow up and view it in perspective. They are in the trenches dealing with problems that seem life threatening and serious. By showing the bigger picture, we are doing more than just giving a birds-eye view to the problem, we are often undermining the reality of their pain. We add guilt and shame when what they really need is hope.

See, when we attach guilt to suffering, we make God distant. Like He is dealing with the big problems in the world (hunger, disease, natural disasters), but my little problems (self-indulgence, greed, depression) are somehow outside of His care and concern. And like most things, that which is supposed to bring us to God, our suffering, now isolates us from Him. We feel shameful for even

considering that which weighs on us suffering, because who are WE to complain. I will tell you who we are, we are broken people in need of healing.

And just because we live in a country where we are not beaten and imprisoned for our beliefs, does not mean that Satan is not looking for ways to bring about suffering in our lives. We are suffering, and I pity the person who does not struggle on a daily basis. Because complacency and comfort are much more powerful tools in the hands of the deceiver than pain and affliction. Our suffering is a gift from God because it forces us to rely on the one and only hope that we have. And understanding that God is there in suffering, all suffering, helps us to actually find joy in it.

So we do suffer, and in today's passage, we will focus on what this suffering does in our life and how gospel suffering actually becomes a powerful weapon in the Christian life. So, **Colossians 1.24-29**:

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, 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, 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

The Suffering (battle lines)

So Paul describes his ministry, but Paul is doing more here than just describing his ministry. In our verses today, Paul draws the lines of what is a great battle. In

defining his role in God's plan, he helps to give us an idea of what our place is in the larger story. He begins by placing himself in relation to the church:

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

Paul starts with the word NOW, making sure that the Colossians are not confused to think that the suffering OR joy that he is talking about is some past tense thing. Right now, sitting in prison, writing this letter, Paul says he is rejoicing as he suffers.

And then Paul makes a few odd claims that if misunderstood can lead us to some wacky beliefs:

1. He is suffering for the sake of people he has never met
2. He is filling up the church
3. What is lacking in Christ's afflictions

So in order to make sense of all of these statements, we need to get draw a picture that borrows from some of the things we have been talking about over the last few weeks. One of the biggest errors we can make is to read a verse outside of its larger context. And people have taken this specific passage to mean a lot of wacky things by doing this.

Two weeks ago, *we said that through Him, He reconciled all things to Himself.* So when we read what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, we know that it can not mean that Paul is completing what Jesus left incomplete on the cross. His suffering is not equal to or for the same reason as the affliction of Jesus, but it is for Jesus that he suffers. Why is Paul in prison? He is in prison because he preached the gospel. Paul is suffering for being part of Jesus body, the church.

Last week we talked about reconciliation, and that the idea of reconciliation only allows there to be two kinds of people, children of God and enemies of God. Those who are in relationship with Him, and those who are not. Those who are His, are now part of a family, united to one another. So when Paul is talking about His life being intricately connected to that of Jesus, and that of the Colossians, what he is describing is the church. This idea of one body, many members, all sharing and connected through Jesus is what **1 Corinthians 12** is about, and it is in verse **26** of that chapter where we read: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*

Finally last week, we talked about the idea of continuing in the faith, especially in the face of thorns, doing their best to choke you out, to dislodge you from the place of faith. And we have seen thus far in Colossians a strong focus on the fact that the foundation of the gospel is stable, but also that there is an enemy trying to knock you off of it.

So with all that in mind, we look at what Paul says here, and we see that he is rallying the troops. He is not simply telling them about what he is doing, but how he is working in the larger battle. BECAUSE THERE IS A BATTLE GOING ON HERE. What Paul is saying is that he is taking some hits for the sake of the team. He is drawing fire away from them. His joy in suffering is actually a battle tactic for the sake of the church. I know I just went all militant, but follow me here. The theme of battle is not something that I am just coming up with, it is evident throughout Paul's letters and was part of the way that he viewed his mission. He was not just out doing God's work; He was playing his part in a war that began way before him.

The battle between Satan and God began because Satan wanted some of the glory that belonged to God. This led to hostility. His focus now is the absolute destruction of what God created good. We see Satan deal an early blow in this battle Genesis. He convinces Adam and Eve to act in opposition to God's

commands. It is God's response to Satan that we see how this battle is going to go. He says:

*I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel."*

This is called the proto-evangelium. It is the gospel in its first and simplest form. It is prophecy that the seed of woman, a child born into human form would come to crush Satan. It will not be without pain and sacrifice for the savior (*and you shall bruise his heel*), but in the end he will be the victor (*he shall bruise your head*).

We see this play out in Jesus Christ. Jesus is bruised at the cross. He is beaten, spit on, and killed. But He does not stay dead. He is nailed to the cross with the sin of humanity, to destroy sin. He defeats Satan by taking on every temptation Satan can give and yet not turning His back on God. He conquers death, the ultimate penalty for sin, by coming back to life three days later. There it is, the WHOLE shebang. Jesus wins. Satan loses.

So what to do with suffering? If it is over and Jesus has won, then why are we still suffering? Well, because Satan is still here, and he is pissed off.

I liken this to a sports team that knows that they have lost the game. I am currently coaching a middle school soccer team which I agreed to do only if it would provide me with sermon illustrations. This week it happened. We lost 8-0. Losing by 8 in basketball or football is not too bad, but in soccer, it is horrible. At the end of a loss like this, you know that you can not win, and the idea of 'play for dignity' has gone out the window. At that point it is hard to have any. So... tempers flare. Pushing begins. The kicking becomes a bit more 'if I get a piece

of the ball it is justified.' If you can't beat them, you might as well get something out of the game.

In the same way, Satan knows he lost. And now he is going to do whatever he can to take down any and all parts of Jesus. The church is Jesus body. The way that Satan can get a last shot at Jesus body, a final bruising, by attacking His people. Paul knows this, and it is why he talks about suffering as joy. To suffer for your own stupid choices and actions is not fun, but to suffer for Christ is joy. Why? Because it shows us that we are part of the battle. It reminds us of who we are attached to in this battle. And it shows us that God did not leave us defenseless in this battle. Paul explains:

The weapon

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, 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.

Paul describes his part in the battle, *to make the word of God fully known*. He then reveals his greatest weapon in the fight against Satan, *the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints*. THE GOSPEL. Paul's part in this battle is to make known the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Paul is an ambassador, given the task of bringing the hope of glory to the ends of the world.

And Paul's part informs our part. If his part was to get the gospel distributed, then our part, in some ways, is to take this wisdom and use it. To fight with the sword of truth, using that which God through Paul revealed to us, to do battle with the enemy. And Paul defines what this fight looks like. He says:

The fight

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

So we have defined the sides. Satan and sin on one side, and Jesus Christ and the Church on the other. We have seen the weaponry. Satan trying to draw us away from God through suffering, ridicule, and lies. Christians armed with the gospel, the Word of God, fighting through the lies and deceit. And now we see what victory is...what Paul is aiming for: *to present everyone mature in Christ*. Victory in the battle has been won by Christ, our part is to make His victory more real for more people.

This is done by proclaiming Jesus Christ: *Him we proclaim*. And this proclamation of the gospel has two aims: to TEACH and to WARN. In other words, it teaches us what we should be doing, and warns us of what we shouldn't. Love as Jesus loved us (teach) and do not be taken captive by any other gospel (warn). The gospel is a weapon because it builds truth and crushes lies. This is what leads to Christian maturity.

As an example of this, let's look at the suffering we began with. The gospel informs our suffering, by teaching us how to suffer, and warning us of how suffering can crush us.

It teaches us as we look at Jesus suffering on the cross. As we see Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see that he was suffering to the point of shedding blood. There was an agony in what was about to happen. Jesus knew well the physical, emotional, and spiritual pain that He was about to endure on behalf of you and I. He did not pretend not to suffer, he did not find a way to avoid it, or blame it, instead He graciously prayed, not your will, but mine

be done. Jesus was willing to suffer for God's glory, to endure for the sake of victory.

In the gospel story we also see how not to suffer in the case of Peter's denial of Jesus. Peter, when faced with the fear of persecution, denied that he was one of the disciples. Peter allowed the weight of suffering to pull him from God. This is a warning!

Maturity is not something separate or apart from God then, the fight is to become mature IN CHRIST. We think of maturity as something that creates INDEPENDENCE. We grow up and mature, and this maturity allows us to get a job, move away from mom and dad and start our own family. Maturity in Christ draws us back to DEPENDENCE. It reveals to us that we do nothing on our own, from ourselves, but that we rely on the power (stewardship) that He has entrusted to us. We use that which He has given us to do His work. And Paul ends by clarifying this: *For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

BEAUTIFUL. I toil, struggling...with HIS energy that HE powerfully works within me.

So we are fighting in a battle that is already won. Our fight is to actually believe that the battle is won. To fight off the lies that come from the outside and within that tell you that something must be added. That something more is needed. That you need to have victory again.

We toil and struggle, but we do so knowing that we are already victorious. We wield the sword of truth boldly, recognizing that the sword is the power not us. We suffer, knowing that one day all suffering will be gone. We fail, knowing that in Jesus we will be presented Holy and Blameless.

Too many of us worry that we are not good enough, we have nothing to offer, we are weak and powerless. The gospel tells us the same thing. But then it offers the hope of Jesus Christ. It empowers us with His strength. Places us on His team. And ultimately, in the end, promises Him as the reward. May we suffer with that in mind.