

May 18, 2008

Colossians 1:24

Good morning. Welcome back. Grab your Bibles. We're going back to Colossians chapter 1. We'll pick up where we left off last week. Last Sunday we looked at verses 21-23, today we are going to look at just verse 24.

"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church."

With this verse and really the end of verse 23, Paul begins a section of the letter where he in several ways defends his ministry – his apostleship – his message. Remember he is writing to the church at Colossae which Paul has never been to. It was started because a guy named Epaphras heard Paul preach – got saved – and went back home and started telling people about Jesus. And now Epaphras has come to visit Paul in Rome where Paul is in prison because of his preaching and he tells Paul that there are these false teachers who are coming into the church and undermining the truth – adding to and distorting the gospel. So Paul writes back to this church to correct the errors and encourage the believers and naturally as a part of that he knows these false teachers are going to try and undermine Paul's authority – his ministry – his message. So a part of Paul's response is to defend those things not out of pride but for the sake of the Colossians who he has never met. And we will look in depth at what that means and what he says along those lines in the next couple of weeks.

But this morning I just couldn't get past verse 24. For two reasons. First of all it has been a source of confusion and even heresy because of wrong interpretations & applications. And we'll deal with that today so you will understand it. But even more importantly, when we get past that, this verse has one of the greatest challenges to American Christianity I've ever seen. And the reason why we study verse by verse through books of the Bible is so we don't skip around the stuff that's hard just so we can feel better. So this morning, this may feel like a short or one-note sermon, but I hope and pray it challenges your hearts as much as it did mine this week. Let's look at it together.

Paul says "now I rejoice in what was suffered for you..." **That "now" is more logical than it is temporal.** It is more like saying "therefore." Paul's not talking about time, **he's CONNECTING what follows to what has gone before.** He rejoices in what was suffered for them because of all that he just got through saying. You can scan back through verses 21-23 if you weren't here last week. He's saying "because you used to be enemies of God in your minds because of your evil behavior" – because "God has reconciled you through Christ's physical body through death" – because He is going to present you "holy in his sight, without blemish, and free from accusation" – because of the truth of the gospel, I rejoice in what was suffered for you.

In this phrase Paul is talking about what had been and is happening to him. Paul is in prison in Rome and the reason for his incarceration is that he was bringing the gospel he just explained to the Gentiles – Gentiles of course are those who are not Jews which included the majority of the Colossians. So **these sufferings (i.e. Paul's imprisonment) are for their sake in the sense that they share in the BENEFIT of the ministry that brought on these sufferings.** So both here when he says "what was suffered for you" and later in the verse when he says "for the sake of his body, which is the church" – both these prepositions do not mean "in place of" – like Paul is in some way taking their place in suffering – but "in the interest of."

Then Paul goes on – read it again with me – "and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions." This little phrase has been the subject of a lot of controversy. Roman Catholics read this phrase and see in it a reference to the suffering of Christians in purgatory. They say this

means that Christ's suffering on the cross was evidently not enough to purge us completely from our sins. Christians therefore must make up what was lacking in Christ's suffering on their behalf by their own suffering after death.

That obviously cannot be Paul's point here. He has just finished explaining in verses 21-23 how Christ alone is sufficient to reconcile us to God. To do an about face now would undermine his whole argument. **The New Testament is clear that Christ's ATONING sufferings need nothing added to them. In Jesus' death on the cross, the work of salvation was COMPLETED.** As John MacArthur explains, "The idea that Paul refers to suffering in purgatory is ruled out by both the general content of the letter and the immediate context, as well as the obvious absence of any mention of a place like purgatory in Scripture." Plus the word Paul uses here for afflictions is "thlipsis" which is never used anywhere in the New Testament to talk about Christ's suffering. So Paul is not talking about the cross here. This verse does not mean that there is anything lacking in the atonement. It does not mean that the value of the death of Christ is shortchanged in any way.

What it does mean is this. The enemies of Christ were never satisfied with what they did to Jesus. They hated Jesus with an insatiable hate. They wanted to add to His suffering. The world wasn't and isn't through persecuting Jesus. The problem is Jesus wasn't and isn't around here anymore. So as soon as Jesus ascended into heaven (see Acts 1:8-11) who did the world begin to attack? The church. They began to persecute the church. Beating them. Arresting them. Roman history tells us how they would tie Christians to wooden stakes, cover them in pitch and tar and then burn them alive to light the roads going into Rome. We've all heard how Christians were thrown to the lions and gladiators for the entertainment of the Roman mob. Hebrews 11 describes how they were "tortured...faced jeers and flogging,...were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword...[they were] destitute, persecuted, and mistreated."

Why? Was it because they hated them individually? No. It's because the church stood in the place of Christ. And since Christ wasn't around to hate, they hated the people who stood in His place. That's what it means to fill up what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions. **When the world wants to hate & attack Jesus, since He isn't here, they hate & attack the CHURCH and individual believers.** And by the amazing grace & sovereignty of God, so often it is that very suffering that accomplishes the spread of the very name of Christ they are trying to quench.

One Romanian pastor names Joseph Tson put it this way. He said, "Christ's cross was for propitiation, ours is for propaganda." In other words, Christ suffered to accomplish salvation, we suffer to spread salvation.

I'm not normally big on other people's stories, but I want you to understand what Paul is saying. J. Oswald Sanders tells the story of an indigenous missionary who walked barefoot from village to village preaching the gospel in India. His hardships were many. After a long day of many miles and much discouragement he came to a certain village and tried to speak the gospel but was driven out of town and rejected. So he went to the edge of the village dejected and lay down under a tree and slept from exhaustion. When he woke up, people were hovering over him and the whole town was gathered around to hear him speak. The head man of the village explained that they came to look him over while he was sleeping. When they saw his blistered feet, they concluded that he must be a holy man and that they had been evil to reject him. They were sorry and wanted to hear the message that he was willing to suffer so much for in order to bring to them.

You may have heard Michael Card's story from him or from Billy Graham about a Masai Warrior named Joseph. One day Joseph was walking along the road in Africa when someone shared Jesus with him. Then and there he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior and the Holy Spirit began to transform his life. He couldn't wait to get back to his village and share the same good news with the members of his local tribe.

Joseph began going door to door, telling everyone about the Cross – the suffering – of Jesus and the salvation it offered – expecting to see their faces light up the way his had. Instead, the villagers not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a water hole and after a few days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception he had received from people he had known all his life and decided he must of left something out of the story of Jesus. He rehearsed the message he had heard and decided to go back and try again.

He limped into the circle of huts to proclaim Jesus. "He died for you so that you might find forgiveness and know the living God" he pleaded. Again they grabbed him and again they beat him and left him to die.

Miraculously, Joseph survived again. And woke up in the bush determined to go back. When he returned, this time they grabbed him before he could even open his mouth and flogged him a third time opening the wounds caused before. Again he spoke to them of Jesus assuming he was fixing to die. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him began to weep.

This time Joseph woke up in his own bed and the ones who had so severely beaten him were trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ. His willingness to suffer for what he was sharing gave credence to the suffering of Christ in their eyes and opened their ears to what he was saying.

What Paul is saying here is that we take the hits that are intended for Jesus. And he says he does so for the sake of his – Christ's – body which is the church. Now in a very literal way, Paul's suffering did have an effect on the entire Church – the whole body of Christ – because of his willingness to continually be thrown in prison, we have the letters he wrote while he was there that have become more than half of the New Testament in God's Word. But I want us to understand the individual in light of the whole. We affect the body of Christ. When we suffer for our faith – because of what we believe and live – it raises the faith of all of us. It builds the value of the gospel and the truth of the Church for all – as encouragement and challenge for the rest of us who believe and as credence and trustworthiness for those who don't. And the opposite is just as true. When we degrade the faith – when we mock our own belief – when we abandon God's truth for whatever reason, we damage us all – both in the church and in the eyes of those without because **our lives – for good or bad – are ASSOCIATED with Christ and thereby the others who claim His name. It is never just about ME.**

Paul understood that better than most. He understood that his life was not his own. Look back at how he begins this verse. He says "I rejoice in what was suffered for you." I rejoice. He says **standing in the place of Him who stood in my place is cause for REJOICING. See joy is the deep down confidence that God is in CONTROL of everything and it's all moving for my ultimate good and His glory.** And there was nothing that could happen that could get deep enough to steal that deep down trust. And that's hard. I'm not saying it is easy.

I was watching Evan Almighty the other night with Nicole – kind of a present day twist on the Noah story – and when God was first explaining to Evan what He wanted Evan to do, He told Evan that whatever I do I do because I love you. And then the movie goes on – if you've seen it you know the comical & real suffering that happens to Evan – animals start following him, he grows a beard he can't shave off, he has to wear Noah-type robes, he gets suspended from his job, and at one point it looks like he is losing his family and he looks up to the sky and says I know I know – everything you do you do because you love me. But could you love me a little less?

And I laughed at that then – I laugh at it now – but I realize the heart behind it is true. See we're basically trained here in America that the best thing in life is pure pleasure and the worst thing in life is suffering. **As Christians we need to understand that the BEST thing in life is glorifying**

God and enjoying Him and the WORST thing in life is not doing that. And if SUFFERING helps us better glorify God and enjoy Him, it's not bad, it's good.

And Paul got that. We see his trust – his hope in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 he says, (TEXT verses 8-11 & 16-18)

This is one of those passages that I thought I understood – that I have quoted to people and friends all the time when I felt like they needed encouragement – but even then it was with an eye towards our reward rather than the glory of Jesus. And that came home to me at the pastor's conference I was at a few weeks ago when a friend of mine who is a pastor in the Houston area told me a story I asked him if I could share with you. There are several things I cannot say because of what is going on, but you can get the gist of it.

My friend Nathan and his father were traveling in the middle east and because of an organization he has ties to was able to meet with the widow of the man who was killed in Gaza last Fall. The guy was a believer and distributed Bibles in Gaza. He was kidnapped by the Hamas – which is a militant group of Muslims – and when he would not recant his faith, they killed him. And when he was killed – his wife and their two kids along with his pastor and a couple of other church members had to flee the country immediately. They left everything – no money, no belongings, no papers – nothing – for safety reasons. And without their legal papers, they could not get into Israel or any other country, so they fled to the West Bank which is still Muslim controlled by not by the Hamas and they are in hiding there. Nathan was able to meet with them while he was there. He was driven around for a long time to make sure no one was tailing them and then dropped off at a building in Bethlehem and taken 3 floors below ground to a room where the pastor, another guy, and this 28 year old widow along with her two pre-school kids and her new baby that was born after she fled. And she told Nathan her story – all that had happened and what was going on. When she was through Nathan just looked at her and said “I am so sorry this has happened to you. I am so sorry that you are a 28 year old widow with 3 preschool kids on the run because your husband was killed.” And Nathan said she looked at him with a curious look on her face and said “Why do you say these things to me? It is the greatest honor to be married to a man who was killed for the faith.” And Nathan just sat down. He had no response. Later he told us one of the guys there told him he was speaking from a very American view of Christianity that isn't shared around the world.

How true is that this morning? Where do we stand on the willing to suffer for the truth gauge? I really believe that if we're honest this morning, we have to agree with what that guy told Nathan. I mean we find it difficult to get up an extra 15 minutes early in order to read our Bibles & spend time with Jesus – we won't risk pulling our kids out of ball practice in order to have them at a church program – we find it tasking to turn off the television in order to do a Bible study or come to one on Sunday night or to spend time in prayer with our spouse or our kids. **If we're unwilling to PRIORITIZE Jesus in our own lives and that of our families on a consistent basis, how are we ever going to RISK suffering so that someone else might hear the truth?** And that's when what we consider suffering is risking someone at school thinking we're weird – risking being left out of the gossip circle at work or even worse being the subject of the gossip circle.

And here we have Paul – who in Galatians 6:17 confesses that he bears on his body the marks of Jesus – that he has been beaten and whipped and stoned and abused so many times just for the chance to speak the gospel that his body will forever show the scars – here in Colossians we have Paul saying “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

You know why we lose our joy? One word. PRIDE. We lose our joy because we believe we deserve better treatment. And the truth is you don't. And neither do I. The worst treatment you could possibly get from men doesn't come close to what you deserve because what you deserve and what I deserve is eternal hell. So if get anything other than that, I have a reason to be a happy man. And I can't expect any more than that. And I know that the God who knows me best, loves me most.

Do you see how all this is connected? How all that Paul just explained over the past several verses – the incomparable glory of Jesus – the utter hopelessness and rightful condemnation of man – the gracious reconciliation of God through Jesus – the future hope of righteousness in his presence – and the resulting ministry of reconciliation He has given to us – that there should be nothing to deter us from spreading this truth? That there is nothing we should fear – nothing we should be turned back by – nothing that displaces Jesus in our lives. That the ministry of reconciliation may include suffering that makes it real.

In fact **there is no way to read Scripture and not come to the conclusion that when it comes to this ministry – this task – this privilege – this ministry of reconciliation, SUFFERING is par for the course.** That doesn't mean we seek it out. It doesn't mean that we feel guilty when God is blessing us with its absence. But it does mean that we don't shrink back when things are hard. And we realize that it may be that God is using the thing the world would call a failure to accomplish His purpose.

Let me just read you one more passage of scripture this morning as we close. In Acts chapter 5 Peter and the apostles are preaching - people are responding – and of course the enemies of Jesus are frightened and angry and react – as they always will be – wherever the church is built, Satan is going to react – the world system is going to rebel. And in verses 40-42, listen to what happens:

40 ... *They [the Sanhedrin – the leaders of the day] called the apostles in and had them flogged [beaten with whips almost to death]. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.*

41 *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.*

42 *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.*

Folks I realize this is not what you would call a feel good sermon. But it may soon be one of the most important ones we hear from Colossians. I believe God wants each of us on our own to come to the conclusion that Paul did – that I have come to this week - that **until we are willing to suffer for the truth, we will make no IMPACT for the Kingdom of God. But because of the impact for the Kingdom of God that suffering is sheer JOY.** And we praise Him for the privilege of being counted worthy to suffer for His Name.