

**Christ Above Suffering**  
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We are in a sermon series titled “Christ Above All” based on the book of Colossians. My sermon is titled “Christ Above Suffering” and it’s based on Colossians 1:24-29.

Jesus Christ suffered for us on the cross, but we share in His suffering. The Christian life is about us being crucified with Christ, dying to ourselves, and laying down everything that we’re holding onto...once and for all. We are all called to suffer and to die with Christ...and that is what Paul is saying in Col. 1:24:

*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.*

Notice Paul uses the phrase “What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” Was Paul suggesting that something was missing in Christ’s suffering? Absolutely, unequivocally, positively not. Paul is not saying there was anything deficient in Christ’s suffering but he was saying that there was a deficiency in Paul’s sufferings.

You see, we are the body of Christ and we represent Christ on earth. He suffered for our sake and now, the only thing lacking in the suffering of Christ is us as His body – His church – suffering for His sake.

Now let me make it clear from the start that I’m not talking about sickness or the consequences we suffer for our sin. I’m talking about suffering for righteousness. And in the above passage Paul is specifically talking about suffering for one another. And when we suffer we fill up what is lacking in Christ’s sufferings.

This is heavy stuff. After all Paul suffered he still felt like he came up short. Because his intention was that as fast as possible, he would fill up what was lacking in suffering like Christ. You see his sole desire was TO BE JUST LIKE CHRIST. Even if that meant suffering. And suffering has meaning only as it results in deep fellowship with Christ. Paul said in Philippians 3:10-11

*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Paul understood suffering from the beginning of His ministry. Here’s what God said about Paul in Acts 9:15-16

*This man is my chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for My name.*

Paul suffered for preaching the gospel. He suffered for the church – the body of Christ. At the time of his letter to the Colossian church he was suffering in prison for preaching the gospel.

2 Cor. 11:23-28 gives us a greater glimpse into the sufferings of Paul. In this passage Paul is comparing himself with false teachers to expose them. He begins by asking,

*“Are they servants of Christ? ...I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. I’ve been whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, in danger from rivers, bandits, my own countrymen, and the Gentiles. I’ve been in danger in the city, the country, at sea and from false brothers. I’ve labored and gone without sleep. I’ve been hungry, thirsty, cold and naked. And besides all this, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”*

With all that suffering in mind, I don’t want you to miss three words Paul says in Colossians - three words that most of us would have difficulty saying.

*Now I rejoice...*

Paul rejoiced in his suffering. Paul wasn’t complaining, he was rejoicing. That’s very convicting to me.

A couple of weeks ago when Samson Titus was here we went to lunch. He is on a hit list in Pakistan because of sharing the gospel in this Muslim country. Every time we get together he invites us to Pakistan. I’m like... “No thank you very much.”

But Paul rejoiced in his suffering... and here’s why. Because his suffering had a purpose. Christ suffered to purchase salvation and Paul now suffered to present that salvation. Verse 24 says he suffered for the sake of Christ’s body, which is the church.

Listen, I don’t even pretend to suffer like Paul suffered but I can relate to the daily concern Paul felt for the church. But you don’t have to be a pastor to suffer for others.

Here’s some of the ways we all suffer for one another.

- Enduring the wrongs inflicted on us by others.
- Forgiving those who hurt us.

- Showing love and mercy when others attack, mistreat, wrong and persecute us unjustly.
- Waiting for a loved one to be saved, delivered, healed, and restored.
- Sacrificing what we want for the best interest of another.

And here's the good news. When we suffer for one another we fill up what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of the church. And we also get to know God more. I can truthfully say that every painful experience I have had has resulted in knowing Christ so much deeper than before.

When I'm in so much pain that I can't even think or pray...and all I can do is cry...that's when I find myself closer to Him than ever before. That's when I'm broken and weak and when all my self-effort just disappears. That's when His cleansing blood just washes over me and revives me and I come away different. I come away more able to love, forgive and lay my life down for others. All my self-confidence is stripped away and I know I can't love without Him. I'm leaning on Jesus and I know that if he doesn't hold me up I'm doomed. I know that the flesh is dying and resurrection life is taking its place.

This is what Paul meant when he said he wanted to become like Christ in His death so he could attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Listen, here's the truth... One way or the other all of us are going to suffer.  
1 Peter 4:12-16 says:

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

1 Peter 3:17 says:

*For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.*

A few weeks ago, our 12-year-old grand-daughter experienced what it means to suffer for doing what is right. Our daughter had been home schooling Jessica for 2 years and had decided to put her back in public school. Here's what happened shortly after. Watch this video.

I'm Jessica and I'm 12 years old and in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. I just recently started public school after 2 years of being homeschooled. I was so excited to be with my friends again. One of my friends lived near me so we were becoming best friends.

Then one day the subject of being homosexual came up. I said that my belief is that it's not right or appropriate to have a gay relationship. She said she didn't think anything was wrong with it.

Within 30 minutes she told everyone in my gym class that I had said her beliefs were wrong and that she shouldn't believe what she believed. I didn't say that. I just said I believed the Bible taught that homosexuality was a sin. At the time I didn't know that her sister was gay.

Well everyone started confronting me and saying how rude and disrespectful I was. Even after I tried to tell my side of the story. I was really hurt. I even went to the locker room and cried. But I never retreated or stood down. I knew what was right and that's all that mattered. As hurtful as this was I don't regret speaking God's truth. I would rather suffer for doing what is right than for doing what is wrong.

That is such a beautiful example of filling up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ. However, when we try to avoid suffering - we displease the Lord.

Peter is a good example of this: In Matthew 16:15

*Jesus asks his disciples "Who do you say I am?"*

Peter rightly replies in verse 16:

*"You are the Christ. The son of the living God."*

Jesus lavishly pours out praise on Peter for this correct answer. He blesses him, calls him the rock and gives him the keys to the kingdom. Then in verse 23, just 7 verses later, Jesus rebukes Peter and calls him Satan. What happened?

What caused Jesus to exceedingly praise Peter one minute and sorely rebuke him the next? What caused Peter to go from a foundation stone to a stumbling stone? Here's what happened: Peter tried to get Jesus to avoid the suffering of the cross. Peter was trying to abort the very purpose for which Christ came. Everything Christ was, everything He stood for, everything He preached, all pointed to the suffering of the cross... and Peter missed it.

Peter wanted Jesus to be a King without a cross.  
He wanted Him to be a Savior without suffering.  
He wanted Him to have dominion with dying.  
Peter just didn't get it.

Unfortunately, most of us "don't get it either." We do everything in our power to avoid the suffering of the cross. But suffering is part of God's plan.

Jesus was falsely accused...but God had a plan.

Jesus felt forsaken by God...but God had a plan.  
 Jesus was beaten and abused...but God had a plan.  
 Jesus was rejected and despised ... but God had a plan.  
 Jesus was nailed to a cross and died...but God had a plan.

You may feel like your dreams have died, your hopes are crushed, and your plans have failed.

Maybe you feel that life has let you down, or God has let you down.  
 Maybe you feel rejected or abused by those who should love you.

But I'm here today to tell you...God has a plan.

His plan is the cross.

You see we gain through loss.

We conquer by yielding.

We find rest under a yoke.

We reign by serving.

We are exalted by being humble.

We are strong by being weak.

We find life by taking up our cross.

And the cross isn't a pretty piece of jewelry we wear around our neck. The cross is an instrument of death.

Paul understood this. This is why he rejoiced in his suffering. He rejoiced because he was suffering for the body of Christ, the church. That's what Paul was saying in Col. 1:25-26

*I have become its (the church's) servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.*

So, what is this "hidden mystery" Paul is referring to here? First, Paul is teaching that the church is Christ's body – In the OT this was concealed, but in the New Testament it was now being revealed.

Secondly, Paul was referring to the mystery of the gospel being preached to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul's was making it very clear that both could come to salvation and both were joint heirs with Christ. This is evident in verse 27 when Paul says...

*To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Here we find the sum of Paul's preaching:

- He is preaching Christ, as the only Savior of all sinners.
- He is proclaiming Christ as being "in them."
- He is presenting this indwelling Christ as the hope of glory

For no man could “hope for glory” without the cross of Christ and the indwelling, sanctifying Spirit of Christ.

Since Christ lives in us...our lives should reflect that Christ lives in us. The problem is most of us don't have a clue what that means.

You see Jesus Christ lived an extraordinary life. It was supernatural. He had a supernatural conception, a supernatural ministry, and a supernatural resurrection. He started the church with a supernatural experience of fire and wind. He caused supernatural signs, wonders and healings... and this same Jesus lives in us and through us.

When we understand this our whole life will be changed. This isn't just hope for **glory one day in heaven** – as great as that is! This actually means **sharing in His glory now**. And one of the **meanings of glory** is the outshining of God's character. That means since **Christ is in us** – His glory **shines through** us now!

That's the goal of what Paul was teaching. Col. 1:28 says:

*We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.*

Notice Paul refers to everyone. This was because the false teachers in Colossae were saying that only a select few could find wisdom and salvation. Paul was making sure they realized that the gospel was for everyone.

Paul made it his life's mission to teach Christ to everyone. And to present them perfect to Christ. Perfect means lacking nothing necessary for completeness. It also means mature. This was Paul's purpose as we see in verse 29:

*To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me.*

The Greek word Paul uses here for struggling is from the same Greek word he uses in Colossians 2:1 when he says:

*I want you to know how much I am struggling for you.*

The RSV says I want you to know how greatly I strive for you. Phillips translation says I wish you could understand how deep is my anxiety for you. The NEB says how strenuous are my exertions. All these translations come from the same Greek word which we get our word agony from. This word also means to contend with an adversary. It also means to fight or labor fervently.

The Greeks understood the implication of this word. It was pointing to the Grecian wrestling matches where each contender fought to master his opponent. It required every ounce of energy he had.

This is not some mamby pamby, feeble effort. This is agonizing in prayer for others. This wasn't just an "I'm thinking about you" or "I took two seconds to pray for you" kind of prayer. Which is about as deep as most of us are willing to go in prayer even for our family and close friends. No, this was deep, prolonged, emotional and energy draining intercession.

But notice that Paul says he was struggling according to God's working in Him. He knew he could do nothing in his own strength, but only by the power of God. Paul was most himself when he was least dependent on his own abilities. Yes, Paul labored - but it was Christ's energy that enabled his work.

We run into problems when we **get our eyes** off our God and onto ourselves. How **weak** we are rather than how **strong** God is. How **poor** we are rather than how **rich** God is. How **addicted** we are rather than how **free** when can be in Christ. How **inadequate** we are rather than how **adequate** God is.

I want to let you in on a **secret** today: the truth is, we are **all inadequate**.  
2 Corinthians 3:5 says:

*Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God.*

You see, **apart from Him** we can do nothing. But we can **do all things** through Christ who strengthens us! The secret of the Christ life is not you trying to be like Christ. It is Christ in you – the hope of glory! And once we grasp Christ as our hope of glory then we are ready to live out 1 Cor. 15:10

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*

Paul is saying that when we are mature in Christ – we know it's not about us – it's about Christ IN us – the hope of glory!

So, when we are **tired of waiting** – Christ in us gives us **patience**.  
When we are **quick to get angry** – Christ in us is our **peace!**  
When we are about to **go off** on somebody – Christ in us is **our restraint!**  
When we are **hateful** – Christ in us is **love!**  
When we are **hurt by others** – Christ in us is our **healer!**  
When we are **lonely** – Christ in us is our **friend!**  
And when we are **weak** – Christ in us is our **power!**  
Unlimited power.

Power to do abundantly more than we can ask or think!

Power to suffer for Christ in order to become like Christ!

Power that even enables us to rejoice in our suffering, because we know that the testing of our faith helps us grow to maturity in Christ Jesus!