

*The King -
Living Within You*

Colossians 1:24-29

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It has to be among the strangest phrases one could ever read.

Could you imagine saying them?

What on earth could he be meaning by them?

"I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake...." (v.24)

Who on earth would rejoice to suffer?

And – given that Paul was in another city, and had never personally met the believers at Colosse, how could he be suffering for their sake?

Then add the next phrase:

"and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

What could he possibly mean by *"lacking in Christ's afflictions"*?

Wasn't the suffering of Jesus completed, once for all on the cross? (Heb 10:11-12)

When Jesus said, *"It is finished!"* was he wrong?

The Colossian believers may have had similar questions. They could have gone to Paul's friend in ministry, Epiphra, and asked him what was meant. And, assuming that Epiphra would have had conversations with Paul about the letter and about the teaching that lay behind the letter, there would have been answers.

We can't do that.

But we are blessed by the Holy Spirit's gift to the Church of the Bible. We have other writings from the pen of Paul. And words from Jesus. And we get some clues from there.

Let's consider, then, verse 24 of Colossians 1 together this evening.

First of all, then, Paul writes of suffering in other places.

In 2 Cor 1:5-7 Paul speaks of the "sufferings of Christ that flow into our lives."

In Eph 3:13 and 2 Tim 2:10 Paul writes about suffering on behalf of other believers.

And in Phil 3:10 Paul says, "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."

Suffering, personal suffering, and suffering on behalf of others, is not unknown to Paul, follower of Jesus.

It is known.

It is expected.

And, actually, Paul gives absolutely no indication why this would be unique to him. He suffers. And other believers, it seems, will follow the same path.

Struggle and sweat and suffering are not to be a surprise in the life of a Christ-follower. They are to be expected. And when they come, to be lived through fully and bravely.

Whoever comes along with the idea that Christian living is all about praise and victory and sweetness and joy and power and prosperity has not surrendered their thinking fully to the Word of God. They've taken some tidbits from that Word, but then warped them with a whole dose of free market, insulated North American prosperity motivational talk.

And all that does is load all sorts of false and unnecessary guilt onto the shoulders of honest believers who do run into stormy weather of one sort or another in their lives. It leaves them wondering, "What did I do wrong to get this? Is God angry with me? Am I being punished?"

The truth may be absolutely the opposite.

Struggle is a real, honest part of Christian living.

And – strangely – something that can be.... not always, but can be..... a cause for rejoicing.

Take the passage we read.

Or, if you want another, check out Romans 5:3 where Paul writes about rejoicing in suffering because it

produces all sorts of great things in our lives:
perseverance, character, and hope.

In Colossians 1 Paul rejoices in his suffering because it is completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the Church.

Let's be clear right up front about one thing.

The word for "afflictions" (*thlipsis*) is never used of Christ on the cross.

The atoning suffering of Jesus, salvation suffering, is done.

That has been completed.

Hebrews 10 makes that very clear.

Jesus did **not** shout out in error from the cross.

We don't suffer in order to ensure our salvation, or the salvation of anyone else.

That is done – all by Jesus. Period.

So – what **IS** going on in Colossians 1?

Well, Paul is connecting with the ancient Jewish teachings about the last times known as "*The Woes of the Messiah*". This taught that there was going to come a time of affliction and struggle – cosmicly, and among the people of God – that needed to be fulfilled. When the full measure of such affliction had occurred, when "*the woes (afflictions) of the Messiah*" were complete, he would come.

That idea is found also in our New Testament. Matthew 24 speaks of great suffering that comes before Christ's return. God himself measures out the time and amount of suffering. He limits it lest it be unbearable, says Jesus.

Where the New Testament differs from ancient Jewish teaching is that the New Testament doesn't talk about the coming of some unknown Messiah figure. It speaks about the return of Jesus. He is the Messiah.

AND – the New Testament shows that:

- while there is the former age, the dark age from which God's people and creation need to be redeemed,

- and while there is the age to come, the age for which we hope, the age of glory,

while there are these two

- there is **also** an OVERLAP age.

There is an overlap between the former age and the era of suffering and the age to come.

Scripture teaches that the New Life of Jesus, Eternal Life, is not just something we gain in the here-after. It begins the moment a person surrenders their life to Christ, and is given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But the reality is that this same person also struggles with the old life – the Romans 7 sort of struggle, "*Oh, wretched man that I am!*"

It is a case of "Already..... and Not Yet...."

Already now we experience eternal life.

But **not yet** do we experience it in all its fullness.

And this in-between era is the era of suffering.

It is the era of tribulation, the era of woes, of wars and rumors of wars, of persecution, of brother rising up against father and daughter against mother, of earthquakes and drought and polluted oceans and diseases killing millions.

That age began with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We are, brothers and sisters, **IN** the era of the woes of the Messiah, **in** the time of the Afflictions of Christ.

Paul is saying that he is taking a load of some of those sufferings that have to happen before Jesus comes back. And he rejoices in it because it speeds Christ's return.

Paul is like a father I sat with outside the intensive care unit where his child lay suffering. He looked at me with deep pain in his face and said, "How I would rather be in that room instead of my child!" Every parent here can understand that sentiment. Paul rather endures the pain himself than see his spiritual children in the Colossian church undergo hardship. He doesn't have to think twice about it!

All Christians participate in these sufferings. Romans 8:17 says that "we share in [Christ's] sufferings

in order that we may also share in his glory." But none of these afflictions is able to separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:38-9). And none of these sufferings can even begin to compare to the glory that is to come (Rom 8:18).

(O'Brien, Word Bible Commentary – Colossians p.79).

So – here's a take-home for you:

Get ready to suffer, be willing to make sacrifice.

We've got to stop looking for the easy way out, or the least amount of work when it comes to doing the work of the Lord.

We want to examine our lives for places and ways in which we find ourselves saying, "what do I **have** to do" and replace them with an attitude that prays "Lord, what **may** I do in your service?"

We have become so soft here in the North American Church. We give less and complain more.

I know that there are the extra stresses of two income homes these days.

But the reality is that we also live in a time where we've got more luxuries than ever before, we have our kids involved in more expensive programs than ever before, and we enjoy more trips and vacations and toys and games than ever before in history.

Every voice around us seduces us with calls to cash out and enjoy the luxury more, to expect it more.

The call to suffer, to sacrifice – when did you hear that last when you settled in your seat at the movie theatre?

Anyone who gets to whining and complaining that life as a follower of Jesus requires surrender, sacrifice and even suffering

– who complains about being asked for too much, too long, too deep, too hard – doesn't get that this is precisely what it is meant to be.

It simply is the way it is in living the Jesus life..

Paul gets that.

He rejoices in it.

Why should we be whining about it?

Be willing to serve, look for opportunities to sacrifice, and don't sidestep times when suffering for Jesus may confront you. Even be **GLAD** when they come.

Know that as you participate in them you are speeding the day of Christ's return. You are investing in the eternal future of brothers and sisters that, like Paul with the Colossians, you may have never seen and may well never see until you stand shoulder to shoulder with them before the throne of Christ.

That's take-home number one.

There's one more before we leave.

And that is this -

While we may better understand what Paul speaks of in filling up afflictions of the messiah in terms of Jewish theology, there is a deeper level to that phrase.

Yes, it was a broad term tied in to end-time understanding.

But, peel away that layer, and you get another.

From the earliest days when believers have read Colossians 1's talk about suffering for the Body of Christ, there has been a sense that something mysterious and deep is being referred to here. There is the sense that Jesus, even as he lives and reigns in heaven, is directly tied into the life of the Church here on earth.

Often we toss the phrase "Body of Christ" around as if it is only metaphor, some nice word picture for pious conversation.

But maybe, just maybe, it is a lot more than that.

Maybe there is a tighter, deeper connection between heaven and earth, between the Saviour and the Church on earth, than we'd care to think.

There is an unshakable sense in this verse that somehow, when Paul suffers while doing the work and

following the calling of Jesus Christ, the Lord himself suffers.

Can we believe that still today?

That as much as we might, in a moment of social justice connection, want to roll out the phrase that we are the hands and feet of Christ in his service,

maybe,
so equally,

we need to be confessing that we are his Body in suffering and surrender.
that as we suffer, Jesus himself suffers.

That maybe it is more than just allusion or metaphor to say so.

There is a direct connection, a deep tie, between Christ in heaven and the Church on earth.

A connection that continues.

A tie that we need to be taking most seriously, and treasuring most deeply.

That's take-home number two.

One of the things that I try to do in my work as regional pastor, when I sit down with colleagues, is to check with them: "Do you **love** the Church?"

I don't want to know if they love their work.

I don't want to know whether they get a charge out of preaching well, or enjoy planning and leading meetings, or developing organizational vision and strategy.

Do they **love** the Church?

I want to ask you the same question.

And understand that it comes back to me, too!

You and me – do we **love** the Church?

Do we treasure it?

Do we honour it as the Body of Christ?

Do we take it seriously as that?

Do we believe that what we do here is felt, directly – somehow – by Christ himself?

I understand all the business about institutional abuses and excesses, and the need for reforms, but frankly I get a little tired with the easy rants and loose rhetoric that gets off on slamming the church of Jesus.

Let's forget about that.

Instead, let's get in, get busy, struggle and suffer and sweat for the well-being of Christ's Body on earth..... instead of sitting back and criticizing... or walking away!

Paul blazes the trail -

suffering

knowing that other believers, with unknown faces, will benefit

knowing that he is doing Christ's suffering.

and **rejoicing** in that.

How about us?