

The Supremacy of Christ Suffering for the Gospel Colossians 1:24-2:1

Introduction

Today we will finish the first chapter of Colossians. Colossians is one of the letters written by the Apostle Paul to the first-century churches. Paul was once an enemy of the Christian faith, but according to Acts Chapter 9, he had an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus that changed his life. He eventually became a leader in the early Christian movement and was, himself, finally imprisoned in Rome for his faith in Christ. While awaiting his trial in Rome, Paul writes this letter to the Christians in Colossae, a small town in south-western Turkey.

Paul writes this letter to deepen the understanding of who Jesus is (1:15-20) and what He has accomplished through His death on the Cross (2:10-15). Amid his teaching on the gospel and the preeminence of Jesus, Paul also mentions suffering for the gospel.

In verses 24 through verse 1 of Chapter 2, Paul writes about successful suffering or triumphant suffering. He writes, "I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily." (Col 1:24-29 NKJV)

Paul wants us to know that even when we suffer for the gospel's sake, we can be victorious in our suffering. He is not out to get their pity but to alleviate their distress about suffering. We know from the letter he wrote to the Ephesians that many of the churches were distressed about Paul's sufferings and imprisonment, and some were losing heart. In Ephesians 3:13, he writes, "Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory."

(Eph 3:13 NKJV)

Some were saying, "If following Jesus leads to this kind of situation, what's the use?" Paul tells them, "There's no need for you to lose heart. I am not discouraged. I haven't lost heart. In fact, I am rejoicing in the midst of my sufferings." Paul acknowledges the suffering, but he calls it triumphant suffering. He also tells them why he is able to suffer victoriously so that they can be victorious in their suffering, too.

The Holy Spirit has Paul record this instruction so that we can triumph as well. Paul gives us three important things to remember when called upon to suffer for the gospel's sake. They aren't the only keys, but they are crucial ones!

I. Understand Where History Is Headed

To triumphantly suffer for the gospel, you must have an understanding of where history is headed. This may sound abstract and initially irrelevant, but this is where you have to start. We are hard-wired with a need to know where we came from and where history is headed.

We need to know this to have meaning and purpose for our lives and hope for the future. Understanding history provides the foundation that motivates us to sacrifice for the present willingly. It fortifies us to endure hardship and sufferings along the way in hopes of a better future.

Douglas Hyde was a leader in the British communist movement in the mid 20th century. Later, he realized that communism was false and became a committed Christian. In his book, *Dedication and Leadership*, he laments that communists were far more willing to suffer and sacrifice for their false cause than most Christians are willing to suffer and sacrifice for their true cause. Why? Because, as Hyde says, they believed that "there is a great battle going on all over the world which, in the final analysis, is a struggle for men's hearts and minds and souls... (and that) although we may not see the end of the battle, its outcome will most probably be decided in this period in which we are living."

It is the Communist conviction that history is headed towards a classless worker state and that they are a vital part of this outcome. The Apostle Paul has a similar world view. However, He believes the utopia of humanity is not Communism but Christ!

Biblical history dominates Paul's mind and burns in his heart. He knows where history is headed, and he knows what specific stage of history he is living. He describes it in verse 26 when he writes, "the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints." ([Col 1:26 NKJV](#))

World history is headed toward the Kingdom of Christ, and human history is headed for the rulership of Christ. Jesus is the anointed one, the Christ, the Messiah, God's anointed Ruler who will one day rescue the world from evil and re-establish God's righteous rule over all humanity. Paul calls this "the hope of glory."

During the Old Testament period, God worked through the nation of Israel to advance His plan. God used the Old Testament prophets to proclaim the promise that the Messiah would be born from the nation of Israel. The prophets gave specific predictions about the Messiah that would enable them to recognize Him when He came. These were specific predictions about his lineage, time-period, birth-place, public ministry, and earthly death.

Jesus fulfilled all these prophecies, even down to His death as a payment for humanity's sins. But what the Old Testament did not clearly reveal was the next stage of God's plan following the ascension of Christ. It is what Paul calls "the mystery."

In the Old Testament, God worked through the Nation of Israel, but in the New Testament, Jesus personally indwells each believer regardless of their ethnic or national background. Jesus calls believers from all over the world "His Body, and The Church" with a mission to spread the good news to all people. Jesus told His followers that this work was the most critical work in this period of history because its completion would bring about His return to earth to rule the nations (Matt.24:14).

This understanding of history gripped Paul, and he felt a deep sense of privilege to live in this stage of God's plan. In verse 26, he calls it "the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints." (Col 1:26 NKJV) This was the foundation that strengthened Paul during his sufferings and motivated him to endure the sacrifice.

Today we live in a culture that, for many reasons, is cynical about any claim to know where history is headed. We no longer teach any history in public schools. Consequently, we are producing generations of kids that have no moorings and no hope for the future. They will become slaves to their environment. This cynicism is becoming part of the philosophical "air" that we breathe these days. Why have websites like Ancestry.com become so popular? Could it be we are searching for a link to our purpose and destiny?

Cynicism and apathy erode any opportunity for a person to support a cause greater than themselves and suppress any reason to willingly embrace suffering and sacrifice. Many Christians today do not have deep convictions about crucial Christian issues, so, like most non-Christians, they resist suffering and avoid making any sacrifices for their faith in Christ.

So how do you build a foundation upon Christ that causes you to embrace suffering in hardship for the gospel? Well, one thing you can do is familiarize yourself with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and look back at the historical examples of faith.

You can read the faith stories of Christian heroes from other ages. You can hang out with people who understand history. And you can let the Holy Spirit connect you to Jesus so you can discover how awesome He is and what a privilege it is to know Him. Knowing Christ created you for eternal life strengthens you to rejoice in the midst of your suffering!

II. Understand Your Unique Role in God's Plan

To triumphantly suffer for the gospel, you must also have an understanding of where you fit in God's Plan.

Viktor Frankl makes this point in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. While a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, Frankl noted that prisoners who believed there was meaning for their lives could endure their terrible sufferings with hope and dignity. Those who lacked this and had only lived only for pleasure and comfort soon wilted and died. Frankl developed what he called logotherapy. It's a form of psychotherapy that stresses that the key to enduring suffering is knowing your life has meaning and purpose.

As Christians, we must realize that our relationship with Jesus is more important than all the temporal comforts and happiness of this life. Frankl writes, "People have enough to live *by* but nothing to live *for*; they have the *means* but no *meaning*..." The goal of life is not to gain pleasure or avoid pain but to seek out and understand your life's meaning and purpose.

A person will not voluntarily suffer unless that suffering has meaning. Jesus suffered excruciating pain and persecution because he knew purchasing our salvation was worth it! After the Resurrection, the disciples were convinced that Jesus was the Son of God. And from that point on, they were willing to give their lives for the gospel. In Acts 5:41, after they were threatened with more suffering, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Act 5:41 NIV)

Paul told the Romans, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Rom 8:18 NIV)

When you discover your eternal link to the creator, you become the enemy of the devil. That often leads to some type of suffering and persecution. Once we embrace our eternal purpose in Christ, we experience the joy of his provision and presence, which makes us willing to cope with suffering and persecution from the devil.

Because we know God exists and can speak to us through his Word and Spirit, we can discover the true meaning of our lives. Paul suffered not only because he understood God's plan but also because he knew God had given him a unique role in His plan (read 1: 25,28,29a). He knew he deserved God's condemnation. Paul was a religious bigot who persecuted and killed Christians. But Jesus forgave him and gave him the privilege of leading Gentiles to faith and helping them mature in their faith.

Paul would go on to say he doesn't lose heart but even rejoices, in spite of his sufferings. Why? Because he knows that his sufferings have meaning. They are worthwhile because they advance God's plan to redeem other people! This is what he means in verse 24 when he says that he does his part in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

When Jesus suffered on the Cross, it was sufficient to pay for our every sin. But for the world to benefit from what He did, Christ's followers were commissioned to

spread this news to the whole world. And to spread this news, each of us will be called upon to endure some form of suffering or persecution. Eph.2: 10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." (Eph 2:10 NKJV)

God is writing His great Story of redemption, and He wants each of us to be a chapter in His great masterpiece. Before you were ever born, God prepared good things in His plan for you to enjoy and accomplish. When we put our faith in Jesus, He gives us a unique role in helping other people come to faith in Christ.

Jesus wants to reach out through you with healing and encouragement. When you catch this vision to help and rescue people, sufferings and sacrifices will *not* crush you because your life's meaning and purpose outweigh them!

III. Understand You Have Access to God's Power

Finally, if you plan to suffer triumphantly, you need to understand God has given you a unique role in His plan; and to fulfill it, you will need access to God's power. In verse 29, Paul says, "To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily." (Col 1:29 NKJV)

Paul suffers for his service to help others grow in Christ. But he serves by the power of God and is not broken by his sufferings. God's power gives Paul the ability to remain steadfast in all his sufferings, just as God gives us this same power so that we can remain steadfast when we are called upon to suffer for the Lord. In verse 11, Paul prays the Colossians will be "strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;" (Col 1:11 NKJV)

The important question is, "How do you gain access to the power of God?" It starts with accepting Christ to be your Savior. You can't access power of God until the Holy Spirit indwells you. Acts 1:8 says Jesus said, "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Act 1:8 NKJV)

The Holy Spirit indwells you the moment you believe in the gospel. Paul told the Ephesians, "In Him (In Christ) you also *trusted*, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory." (Eph 1:13-14 NKJV)

So many believers try to live the Christian life without accessing God's power. When you live the Christian life in your own strength, the sufferings you experience for Christ can be crushing. But you can make a decision that changes all of this. You can call out to Jesus in faith and ask Him to empower you with His Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is not a force that you can use for your own purposes. He is God who empowers you to accomplish His purpose, to draw people to faith in Jesus, and to help them to mature in Jesus. When God's Spirit indwells you, you are aligned with His purpose, and all you need to do is simply ask God for the power of His Spirit in each situation. In Lk.11:13, Jesus promises that God will give the Holy Spirit to empower believers when they ask Him.

How often do you ask your Heavenly Father for the power of His Holy Spirit to guide you and strengthen you?

Conclusion

The goal of Paul's ministry was to bring people to maturity in Christ, and not to dependence upon others. "The objective of this letter, and all of Paul's apostolic work is admonishing and teaching believers to realize the perfection of Christ. It is the Lordship of Christ that perfects the whole church and resolves every issue we face; even those that include suffering.

Sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ is the work of every believer. The false teachers at Colosse taught that the way of salvation was so involved that it could only be understood only by a select few who made up a sort of spiritual aristocracy. Paul says our work for Christ is empowered by God's mighty strength even though it requires great effort on our part.

Don't retreat from the opposition to the gospel message. Let God arrest your attention and strengthen your witness even if that means you may face suffering or persecution for Christ's sake. Remember the goal is for us to help each other grow in Christ and when called upon to suffer; suffer triumphantly for the glory of God!