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Colossians 1:24-2:5

10th Message

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A SUFFERING SERVANT

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

When the e-bulletin came out this week it read, “This Sunday’s Message: John Hanneman, A Suffering Servant.” My wife broke out laughing and asked if I was going to talk about myself. No, I am not going to talk about myself, but we are going to talk a bit about suffering.

When I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior I was motivated by a search for meaning, deliverance from darkness, and a new life. I had no idea at the time that following Jesus would involve suffering, perhaps even more suffering than if I had not become a Christian. We sang about God’s goodness and faithfulness today at the beginning of the service. A common question for most of us is, “How do we view suffering in light of God’s goodness and purposes?”

Our text once again is Colossians 1:24-2:5, as it has been the last two weeks. Each week we are picking up a theme in this autobiographical section of the letter where Paul writes from the first person as a servant of the gospel and a servant of the church. Two weeks ago we talked about Paul being an unlikely servant of God, being chosen to bring the gospel message to the Gentiles after his dramatic conversion on the Damascus road. To him was revealed the mystery of God in Christ, not only a Christ for Israel but also a Christ for the world. Certainly Paul could never have imagined how God would use him when he was persecuting Christians. We too are servants of God, many of us very unlikely candidates, sent by God to places we would never have chosen for ourselves.

Last week we talked about Paul being a purpose-filled servant. Not only was Paul an evangelist but he was also a pastor. His desire was for the saints in Colossae and elsewhere to be formed in Christ and grow fully into maturity. This is God’s goal for each and every believer without exception. The work of transformation takes place as we center our lives on Christ, the hope of glory, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In Christ we have a deposit of inexhaustible wealth and resources, everything we need for being formed into the image of Christ.

Today we are going to address one more theme. Paul was not only an unlikely and purpose-filled servant; he was also a suffering servant. Our focus is just on two verses this morning, verses 1:24 and 2:1:

1:24 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.

2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face. (ESV)

Paul’s Suffering

We know that Paul suffered greatly for the gospel as a servant of God to the Gentiles. Jesus himself promised suffering at his conversion on the Damascus Road: “I will show him how much

he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). The Saul who inflicted suffering on Christians became the recipient of great suffering.

The most detailed list of Paul’s sufferings is found in 2 Corinthians 11: Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28)

Paul also writes in 2 Corinthians:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. (2 Corinthians 1:8-9)

Paul and the other apostles expected to die for the gospel.

The word “sufferings” in verse 1:24 “...was used from the time of the Greek tragedians onward to denote that which befell a man and had to be accepted by him.”¹ Except for one occasion in the New Testament (Heb. 2:9), it always appears in the plural and has the idea of misfortune or affliction.

The word “struggle” in verse 2:1 was a word used of an athletic contest. We encountered this word last week in 1:29, a word from which we get our word “agonize.” It can mean to strive or fight. Even though Paul never met the believers in the Lycus Valley, he still struggled greatly on their behalf. This statement is very akin to the idea of “sufferings for your sake.” Most likely this included inner turmoil and concerns, praying endlessly, and writing letters.

Paul’s Perspective

What was Paul’s perspective toward his sufferings and struggles? And in particular, what does verse 1:24 mean exactly? How can Paul’s sufferings be an occasion for rejoicing? How can Paul’s sufferings be for the sake of the Colossians and the body of Christ? How can Paul’s sufferings fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions? There has been a great deal of debate over this verse.

Certainly this verse does not mean that Christ’s suffering and death on the cross was deficient or lacking in some way, such that there needed additional suffering by Paul in order to complete the work of atonement. The word “affliction” is never used of the cross and Jesus’ experience of suffering. Also, as we shall learn in chapter 2, Christ’s death on the cross was sufficient to forgive all of our sins.

Several times Paul uses the word “sufferings” to denote the afflictions that all Christians must experience as part of the sufferings of Christ. What is true of Christ is true of those in Christ. Christ’s sufferings become our sufferings. There is a corporate personality of the church as the body of Christ. We are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:10). This is certainly true and perhaps Paul is referring to this truth as he does elsewhere in his letters. And yet Paul here speaks specifically of his own sufferings.

Most likely the meaning of verse 24 is tied to the Jewish expectation of the end times and the coming of the Messiah. In Jewish tradition there was the expectation that disasters and catastrophes, such as plagues, wars, and famine, would be a prelude to the end time and usher in the coming of the anointed ruler of God. These afflictions were called the “woes of the Messiah” and even God’s people, the righteous, would suffer. This is how Israel saw their history of suffering at the hands of other nations. When this suffering reached a limit or climax, then God’s anointed would come.

Now we know that the Messiah has come and that the death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the age to come even though the present age continues. We live in the already, but not yet. But with the Jewish tradition in view, the afflictions of Christ are ongoing and when their appointed limit has been reached Christ will come again, this time in glory. The age to come will be consummated and this present evil age will pass away. Jesus himself spoke of an escalation of suffering in Mark 13 that would take place prior to his return and the coming of judgment and salvation.

Paul has an amazing perspective. He knows that the afflictions of Christ that will usher in the new age fully are still lacking. Suffering is still required to fill up the bucket, so to speak, to God’s predetermined limit. Paul sees his own suffering in the flesh as adding to the measure of what is needed. The more he suffers the less suffering will be required by the saints in Colossae and elsewhere. Therefore his suffering is for the sake of others and this in turn causes him to rejoice.

That is Paul, but how about us? I doubt whether many of us have Paul’s perspective or even his attitude of rejoicing. Suffering is a big topic and there is so much we could talk about. But let me mention a few things and hopefully they can be helpful.

Suffering is unavoidable

One day Lucy and Charlie Brown were reflecting on “...life’s difficult and puzzling moments. Charlie thoughtfully comments to Lucy, ‘Life has its ups and downs.’ Pondering this, Lucy replies, ‘Charlie, why can’t life just have its ups and ups?’”² “Fyodor Dostoyevsky simply asserted, ‘To live is to suffer.’”³ And I have to agree.

This was brought home to me a couple of weeks ago as I sat here at a memorial service for little Julia Brown. During the middle of the service I suddenly realized that it was the thirteenth anniversary of my brother’s tragic death in a car accident. Sorrow flooded my heart and I felt the sadness and loss I experienced thirteen years ago as if it was yesterday. My brother was ten years older than me and I grew up wanting to be like him in many ways. He was bigger than life and he was the patriarch of our family. I really miss him.

In this world we will have troubles. There is nothing we can do (such as being a good, obedient Christian) to prevent or protect ourselves from suffering and misfortune. Every day as we read about

wars, economic crisis, and random acts of senseless violence. We read about earthquakes, tsunamis, tornadoes, hurricanes, and famine.

Closer to home we suffer the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, marriage struggles, illness, infertility, estrangement from a family member, a wayward child, conflict with a co-worker or a friend, accidents that have caused damage. I know that many of you are suffering from things like this right now.

We also suffer like Paul for the gospel either directly or indirectly. Some Christians suffer for their faith directly in places like Syria and Israel. But we suffer too. Perhaps our faith has caused rejection by our family or friends. Following Christ might mean sacrificial love, loving an enemy, facing into a conflict instead of running away, caring for someone again and again, waiting on the Lord instead of taking matters into our own hands, resisting temptation. Sometimes our greatest wounds come from those who love us or from fellow Christians whom we have trusted. Some suffering we bring on by ourselves but mostly there is no cause and effect. We are not greater than our master and following him means dying to self and that too is a suffering. Jesus said: “...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

We all have our crosses to bear and our share of sufferings. But our sufferings are seen in the light of Christ’s sufferings. We suffer with Christ and for Christ. We are suffering servants.

Suffering is painful

Simon and Garfunkel’s philosophy, “I am a rock, I am an island. And a rock feels no pain and an island never cries.” doesn’t work. I tried it. Much closer to the truth is John Donne’s sentiment: “every man’s death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. Therefore, never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.” As R.E.M. sings, “everybody hurts sometime.” To be human is to feel pain.

In the midst of suffering we don’t have to be tough and stoic. We can lament and bring our tears to God. Scripture gives us plenty of examples and language for our emotions:

Job cursed the day he was born:

**Why is light given to those in misery,
and life to the bitter of soul, (Job 3:20 TNIV)**

**Why is life given to a man
whose way is hidden,
whom God has hedged in?
For sighing has become my daily food;
my groans pour out like water.
What I feared has come upon me;
what I dreaded has happened to me.**

**I have no peace, no quietness;
I have no rest, but only turmoil.” (Job 3:23–26 TNIV)**

Jeremiah too cursed the day he was born and cried out to God:

**Why has my pain been perpetual
And my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? (Jeremiah 15:18
NAS95)**

Of course we are familiar with David’s laments, such as Psalm 13:

**How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts**

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me? (Psalms 13:1–2 TNIV)

All of us have mouthed similar words at some point in our life. None of us gets through life without knowing the pain of suffering.

Suffering exposes the hidden things of our hearts

Suffering exposes the things we would love to conceal and hopefully brings them into the light of Christ, which is also painful. Suffering exposes our fears and insecurities, our longings and yearnings, our wounds that go deeper than the circumstances. But it also exposes our sin and darkness, our selfishness and fragile egos. We get angry and want to hurt someone. We shake our fist at God and escape into our addictions. We grow bitter and resentful. We respond to people in unhealthy ways with reactions that are out of proportion to the situation. Suffering threatens our faith in God and we question his goodness. Suffering tempts us to leave the path of obedience.

As all of our reactions bubble to the surface we face a choice. Will we trust God both in feast and in fallow? Will we run away from God or run towards God? Will we use our suffering to justify our disobedience or will we continue to walk with God? Can we let go and accept what God has for us? Can we trust him? These decisions are an essential part of our journey and may take quite some time for us to process and decide. Job, Jeremiah, and David were all brought to this place, as must we if we are to receive the grace that God intends for us.

Suffering is formative

If we are able to accept the place of suffering, bring it into the light of Christ, and allow God to have his way with us, then suffering leads us to a place that is beyond our immediate desires. Suffering works to sanctify and purify our hearts, to form and transform us. This is what Paul says in Romans 5, our Scripture reading this morning:

We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. (Romans 5:3–4).

James says the same thing:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2–4).

This is exactly what we talked about last week – Paul’s goal of presenting every believer complete or perfect in Christ. A major component of this goal is suffering. It is through suffering that God works to form his character in us. As we allow the light of Christ to shine in the dark places that suffering exposes, the bondage of sin is broken. Our grip on this world is loosened and it no longer has control over our inner freedom. We begin to travel light because we know our home is no longer here. On several occasions in the New Testament the idea of suffering and glory are closely connected. If life went the way we wanted, we would hold on too tightly to this world that is fading away. Instead we put our hope in Christ, the hope of glory.

Bruce Demarest writes: “Most schools of secular psychology view distress and pain as problems to be solved or at least relieved.”⁴

God accomplishes his most profound work in the lives of his children not in times of tranquility but in seasons of hardships. According to spiritual writer Jean Pierre de Caussade, ‘God instructs the heart, not through ideas but through suffering and adversity.’⁵

Suffering leads to a deeper intimacy with God

Besides working to form God’s character in us, there is something deeper still. I know that this sounds crazy, but it is true. I don’t know if I can tell you to rejoice over your sufferings. That is a little beyond my experience. But what I can tell you is that God uses all of our suffering to bring us into a sweet communion with him. When we encounter God in the darkness we know his comfort and love. When we encounter God in all our weakness, weariness, and wickedness we know that he accepts us as we are and will never forsake us. When we can hear God’s voice whispering his delight in us we know that he has heard our cry and answers us in a way that is greater than we had asked. When we can sit in the presence of God without fear we find something greater than the absence of pain – we find intimate communion with God.

This same truth also applies to human relationships, especially those people who are a significant part of our lives. All of the struggles, pains, and storms of life do not prevent intimacy but are the opportunity to grow in intimacy as we learn to love, forgive, and be present to each other, even without words.

Last summer my daughter and I climbed a 14K mountain in Colorado. We didn’t quite make it all the way to the top, but we got pretty close. I thought that we might have a significant conversation but we just walked the trail and enjoyed a beautiful day together. When I got home I kept thinking about the hike. It was on my mind constantly, especially when I was falling to sleep each night. I sensed there was something in it for me that was more significant than just the hike itself. After a few weeks the Lord revealed the meaning to me. He said “that is you and me walking up the mountain together. There may not be a lot of conversation but I am with you in every season of life.” It is through suffering that we truly come to know God’s presence personally, not just facts about God learned in Sunday school or seminary.

This is what Job discovered through his sufferings and wrestling with God:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; (Job 42:5)

And then hopefully we can say with Paul, “I rejoice in my sufferings.” And with the apostle Peter who writes: “rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:13).

We rejoice as N.T. Wright comments:

...not casually, flippantly or superficially, but because they (our sufferings) are signs that the present age is passing away, that the people of Jesus, the Messiah, are the children of the new age, and that the birth pangs of this new age are being worked out in us.⁶

Communion

What a great morning to come to the Lord’s Table and bring our suffering to him. Paul was a suffering servant, we are suffering servants, but Jesus is The Suffering Servant. As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning we are reminded that our Lord suffered as

a human being, as a man. His body was broken and his blood was shed. We are also reminded that the Father suffered as well, as he watched his son sacrificed as a common criminal for our sake. We are reminded that our sufferings are part and parcel with his sufferings. But we are also reminded that the blood that was shed was the blood of the new covenant and that even while we suffer we are already living in the age to come. As the team sang this morning:

On a cross of wood, His blood was outpoured
 He rose from the ground, like a bird to the sky
 Bringing peace to our violence, and crushing death's door
 Our Maker incarnate, our God who provides.⁷

For the bread that we have eaten
For the wine that we have tasted
For the life that you have given
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
*We will praise you.*⁸

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1. Peter O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 75.
2. Bruce Demarest, *Seasons of the Soul*, (IVP Books, Downers Grove, IL, 2009), 40.
3. Demarest, 41.
4. Demarest, 77.
5. Demarest, 50–51.
6. N.T. Wright, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. Colossians and Philemon*, (IVP Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1986), 94.
7. Sandra McCracken, *In Feast or Fallow*, 2010 DRINK YOUR TEA MUSIC (ASCAP), admin. by SIMPLEVILLE MUSIC, inc. All rights reserved.
8. The Oxford Book of Prayer, Ed. George Appleton, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1985, 159.