



Colossians 1:24

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering 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.

Reflection

Some trivia to begin today. What do all these great works of literature have in common? *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, *The Travels of Marco Polo* by Rustichello da

Pisa, *Civil Disobedience* by Henry David Thoreau, *Letters from Birmingham Jail*, by Martin Luther King Jr., and *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde? Answer: they were all written from prison. And yet, by far and away the greatest works of literature ever to be written in prison, works read and re-read now millions of times, are Paul's four letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and to Philemon. We read us much about the place of writing of the book of Colossians in chapter 4 verse 3,

3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.

And again, later in verse 18,

18 I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

Remember my chains. Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians from inside prison walls. And yet this came as no surprise to Paul because Jesus had been upfront with him from the beginning, just as Jesus is upfront with us when it comes to suffering. Jesus said about Paul in Acts 9,

This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.

In today's passage, Paul, writes from prison about his sufferings. Now that that he

has greeted the Colossians (1:1–2), prayed for them (1:3–14), raised their vision of the supremacy of Jesus Christ into the stratosphere (1:15–20), and reminded them of the powerful and lasting change that has come over them by the power of the gospel (1:21–23) – now that he has done all these things – Paul briefly turns to himself (1:24–29), beginning with his suffering on their behalf. Today’s passage, Colossians 1:24 says,

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering 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.

Jesus warned Paul that his ministry to the Gentiles (that is, non-Jews, like the Colos-

sians) would come at great personal cost. And Paul's writings in the New Testament give us rare and reluctant glimpses of the sufferings he went through. Paul doesn't like to talk about them much, except in situations when his credibility is under attack, like in 2 Corinthians when he is being undermined by false teachers who are threatening the church he has planted in Corinth. In situations like the one in Corinth, Paul reluctantly comes to his own defence, for the sake of the gospel. Just listen to the kind of life he lived in service of Jesus, try and imagine it, 2 Cor 11:23–28,

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.

24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. 27 I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my con-

cern for all the churches.

Paul's ministry, his whole life, was characterized by suffering for Jesus. And yet, paradoxically, Paul begins today's passage with these words,

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you,

How is it that Paul can rejoice in a life like this one? So often we find it hard to find joy even in our privileged Western contexts. How can Paul write that his life is filled with joy, even as he pens the words from the darkness and isolation of a prison cell? The answer is found in the remainder of the verse,

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fering 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.

How can Paul rejoice amidst his suffering? The answer is the gospel. The gospel has always been spread through missionary hardship, as missionaries take their cue from Jesus Christ, the first missionary to our world, who suffered and died so that the good news about his death and resurrection might go out to the four corners of our globe. Paul rejoices because his ministry has resulted in just this; suffering, yes, but also the spread of the gospel and eternal life amongst Gentile churches like the one in Colosse. Paul's suffering also means that he has the great honour of following in the footsteps of Jesus.

But Paul uses a somewhat complicated turn of phrase here. What specifically does he mean when he says,

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.

Now here, Paul of course isn't suggesting that Jesus' sufferings on the cross were somehow insufficient in fully and finally dealing with the human problem of sin. No, Paul is explaining suffering in terms of his and our 'union with Christ'. The Bible teaches us that Christians are united with Christ. We have been buried with Christ, raised together with him, and made alive together with him. We are in him and he is

in us. And as Christ's body, if you like, the church has a corporate personality. Which means that if Christians together share in dying and rising with Christ, they also share in his sufferings and he with theirs. Christ, therefore, continues to suffer in his body, the church. And his suffering and ours is not only a sign of the new age, the age of the kingdom of God that was inaugurated at the death and resurrection of Jesus, but will last until Jesus returns to fully and finally usher in his kingdom. Thus again, our suffering is cause for rejoicing, in that it points to this decisive final reality.

Think & Pray

Pause now to consider your personal and corporate suffering as a member of Christ's church. One commentator, N T

Wright, goes as far as to say that ‘Paul understands the vocation of the church as being to suffer’. He goes on to clarify in saying,

‘We would be wrong to think of suffering only in terms of direct outward persecution for the faith. ... all Christians will suffer for their faith in one way or another: if not outwardly, then inwardly, through the long, slow battle with temptation or sickness, the agonizing anxieties of Christian responsibilities for a family or a church, the constant doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith, and ‘the thousand natural shocks that the flesh is heir to’, taken up with the call to follow Christ.’

All Christians will suffer. Perhaps you are suffering particularly acutely at the moment – outwardly or inwardly, or both. If so, draw strength from these words of assurance – by the grace of God there is joy to be had in our suffering. N T Wright continues, after listing our outward and inwards sufferings,

All these, properly understood, are things to rejoice in – not casually, flip-pantly or superficially, but because they 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 them.

Share with God this morning the areas in your life that are causing you pain because

of your Christian faith. Perhaps it's outward persecution from work colleagues hostile towards Christianity, or perhaps it's the inward torment of sinful temptation and the conflicting desires of a wayward heart (the daily struggle of every Christian growing in their faith). Pray also for our brothers and sisters who are experiencing severe physical and emotional suffering for the spread of the gospel. Thank God that as Christians we can rejoice in our sufferings because of what they are pointing to, and pray that if it is not God's plan for our sufferings to go away in this moment, that we would be able to rejoice in them by the power of his Holy Spirit.