



THE SUPREMACY OF CHRIST IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD SOMETHING WORTH SUFFERING FOR

Colossians 1:24-25—2:5

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Introduction – Paradoxes

The Christian faith is deeply paradoxical. At the very heart of the Christian faith are seemingly absurd or contradictory affirmations that are nevertheless true and need to be affirmed. In the very heart of Christianity for example, Christians affirm a very paradoxical thing—the Trinity—one God *and* three persons with one nature. The Incarnation is paradoxical; we affirm God in human flesh. Jesus Christ is one person with two natures—divine and human nature, perfectly co-inhering. And the Creator-creation distinction is paradoxical. God is everywhere present in creation but not in any way a part of creation. We are not pantheists as Christians; we believe in a creator-creature distinction. Wherever you go, God is there and yet God is not *in* anything but is under, over and through all things. This is a very profound paradox right at the heart of the Christian faith in doctrine and teaching.

So, too, there are profound paradoxes right at the heart of Christian *living*. It seems like in every other word of Jesus to his disciples are enigmatic statements that drew them in and kept them on the path of discipleship. Statements such as, “If you want to gain your life, lose it.” That’s a paradox. Common sense says if you want to gain your life, you fight for it. You strive to maintain and keep it. But Jesus speaks these paradoxical truths, as we hear him say in Acts 20, “It’s more blessed to give than to receive.” The world knows all about blessing, so they think; it’s about the business of acquiring, receiving and gaining. Yet this profound, practical paradox in the Christian life is that the way of blessing is the way of giving—laying down your life, spending your resources for the sake of other people.

Another very profound and practical paradox is the paradox of *rejoicing in suffering*. How is it that you can rejoice while suffering, while having pain? It seems like a contradiction, does it not? The world knows about rejoicing of course, and about suffering. They would want to keep the two apart but because of what Christ has done and the gospel, we in the Christian community and those who are followers of Christ know this profound and practical paradox in Christian living. Many have experienced this profound paradox of somehow being able to rejoice in the midst of your suffering. Somehow this is a reality for you.

We Can Rejoice in our own Suffering

I had a fresh reminder of it this week. Many of you have been praying for little Rachel Lynn, Joel and Dorothy Ayres’ granddaughter who went home to be with the Lord midweek. I share this with permission from the Ayres—a letter from their son-in-law that came out fresh on the heels of their devastating loss. Listen to their processing of their grief at Rachel’s spinabifida and home going at four weeks old.

Greetings again family and dear friends,

We continue to hope that this message finds you well and encouraged. It’s been a very blessed and difficult week. We want to say thank you for the many prayers and

blessings that we've been shown during the last month or so. We would ask that you would continue to pray for us as we continue to do "our best" for God.

Last night Rachel went home to be with Jesus. At 8:43 pm central time, she breathed her last breath and was gone.

Then this next sentence:

There really are no words we can write down here to convey the simultaneous presence of sadness and utter joy that flows through and out of us.

Did you hear that?—that profound paradox of Christian living? Rejoicing in suffering—this is the way a mature Christian thinks and processes his human experience; this is the sound of it. "There really are no words that we can write..." It's paradoxical. We don't know how to give expression to it. It eludes words and language, and comprehension. You have to experience it to know it. We cannot write it down to convey this little phrase, "the simultaneous presence," both together in the same experience "of sadness and utter joy..." Then he says so rightly, "that flows through and out of us." That's the paradox of *rejoicing in suffering*. I'm sure many of you have experienced that in your own way over the years as you have gone through hard times and the Lord has sustained you. You know about this paradoxical reality of rejoicing in suffering.

Paul certainly did. If we know anything of Paul, it is that he endured a lot of suffering. In Colossians 1:24 he talks about this paradox of rejoicing in the midst of suffering. We see here Paul giving expression to this paradox of rejoicing in the midst of suffering in perhaps one of the most provocative ways anywhere in the Bible. Look at verse 24,

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for your sake

Let us pause on that for a while. Do you hear people talk like that these days? Do any of your colleagues at work talk like that, or do strangers that you bump into on the street say, "I'm rejoicing in what I am suffering."? Is this some sort of Pauline encouraging Christians to weird masochistic suffering?

We are going to clarify the call for Christians to rejoice in suffering. First, Paul is not rejoicing in the experience of suffering, nor should we. When we are called to rejoice as Christians in our suffering, we do not rejoice in the pain, in the existential experience of the suffering. Remember that suffering, after all, is a result of the fall. So in one sense, we Christians, as new-creation people are pushing back against the fall of the world and all of its results in terms of suffering, rebellion against God, tears and bloodshed and all of that. We are anticipating a new heavens and new earth where righteousness will reign and where suffering will be gone. So do not misunderstand what Paul is saying and think that your goal in life is to rejoice in all the bad stuff that come my way and revel in it! Sometimes in a fitness club, you hear loud groans from big dudes wearing shirts that say "No pain, no gain;" they are on the bench press letting stressful groans out. It makes you think those guys just like pain! That is not what Paul is saying. Rather, we rejoice in the *occasion* that suffering provides us with—the occasion for God to do something in our character to develop perseverance through us. Look at James 1:2,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

So we rejoice in suffering, as we learn elsewhere in the New Testament, because it an occasion for God to do something in us, namely, developing our character. We also rejoice because it is an occasion to proclaim Christ in and through us. That is what you heard in the letter I just read. This deep sadness and utter joy working through us and out from us. That is what Paul is talking about here.

So the first thing to not misunderstand about the call to Christian life to rejoice in suffering is that we do not rejoice in the experience of suffering, the pain itself; we rejoice in the occasion it provides us to grow our commitments to Christ, or to speak and proclaim Christ in and through us. The second misunderstanding is that we have no biblical warrant to rejoice in the suffering in our life that is the result of stupidity and sin.

We all probably have suffering in our life that is the result of our own stupidity and sin. In one sense, it is not that God cannot redeem that. Do not misunderstand; we sin, we blow it, there are consequences but God can orchestrate and work good out of that. No doubt about it! Biblically speaking however, we do not have a warrant to rejoice in that kind of suffering in our lives. Rather, we have warrant to *repent* in light of that kind of suffering because of stupidity or sin. So the key here is in what Paul says in verse 24, “I rejoice in what was suffered *for you.*” Underline that little phrase in your bible. That is the key to the kind of suffering that he was rejoicing in. This is others-directed suffering. This is not suffering such as a bad back from sitting at your desk too long; you don’t have a healthy lifestyle and do not exercise like you should. No, you do not rejoice in that back pain. The Bible tells you to rejoice in your back pain if you spent all day Saturday helping your neighbor carry his boxes up to his attic so you can encourage, bless and love him so you can talk to him about the Lord. That is the kind of suffering that you can rejoice in because it is others-directed; that is the kind of suffering that Paul is talking about here.

So there are two misunderstandings that we need to be clear of here. One is thinking that we rejoice in experiential suffering, being “in the pain”, a kind of Christian masochism. That is not it. Nor can we rejoice in the suffering that comes into our lives as a result of our own stupidity and sin. Rather we repent because of the suffering because it is a cattle prod for us! We rejoice in the suffering that is for other people. Still, the question remains: How? How is it that we rejoice in suffering? It is so easy for the preacher to say, “Rejoice and suffer!” How on earth is that possible?

We can Rejoice in our Suffering because it makes Christ Known

If you have lived a little bit of life as a Christian you know that when the suffering comes, it is not very easy to rejoice in the midst of suffering. What is the key? I think we see the key in this passage. The essence of what this passage teaches as it relates to suffering is this: that our sufferings can be an occasion for joy or a source of joy in our lives *when they are viewed in light of God’s bigger plan to make Jesus Christ known.* So when hardship and suffering come into your life through providence and circumstance, like illness, financial hardship, or when you plan on meeting the needs of someone else and thus *have* to endure hardships so you can meet that need—like Paul was so busy doing—like selling off your retirement fund, or downsizing your house in order to give it to a couple of missionaries. You know you are going to incur some hardship because of that. When suffering comes into your life like that, how do you rejoice in the midst of that suffering? You rejoice by seeing God’s bigger plan, what he is up to in the

world, to make Christ known in and through your life and through your sufferings in particular. That is what Paul is saying!

In verse 24, “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you,” you might ask *why* does he rejoice in what is suffered for you? He gives us the reason in the second part of verse 24, *because* I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions”. Did you know that was in the Bible? Did you know something was “still lacking” with regard to the afflictions of Christ, or does that sounds like plain heresy to you? It is an odd thing to say, is it not, that there is something lacking in what Jesus Christ did? “And I’ve got to make it up,” Paul is saying! What is he saying then?

We know from elsewhere in the New Testament the sufficiency of the Cross is *everything*. The whole theme and message of Hebrews is the sufficiency of the new covenant sacrifice over against the old sacrifice. Hebrews chapter 9: we do not have a high priest that needs to go into the temple again and again and again because of the insufficiency of sacrifice; our high priest has gone in once and for all; the sacrifice is sufficient. So it cannot be the insufficiency of the Cross, or the power and effectiveness of the Cross, much less in a letter that is intended to uphold the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ. How can he undermine his whole argument? Paul seems to be saying there is something missing in what Christ has done for us! But what is still lacking in regard to the afflictions of Christ?

Paul uses this language of something still being lacking and being made up in two other places in the New Testament. As an analogy to what he is saying here, the first is at end of 1 Corinthians 16 where Paul talks about three members from the Corinthian congregation who come to him. Paul says they essentially “filled up what was lacking with regards to your service to me,” that is, their coming to me and bringing your presents to me as delegates from you has filled up what was lacking in regard to your service to me. The other place it shows up is in Philippians 2 where Paul is writing from Roman imprisonment. He writes this letter to the Philippians saying, “I’m going to send back to you (church in Philippi) Epaphroditus, one of your own who you sent to me to see how I was doing, so you are not anxious about how I am doing.” Paul says to the Philippians, “You should honor people like Epaphroditus who nearly lost his life coming to see me in Rome.” And he adds that “Epaphroditus has filled up what was lacking in regard to your service to me as well.” Same thing as what he says about the people who came from Corinth.

So what is Paul saying in both contexts? He is saying that the physical presence of a person, or persons, is making up for the lack of the presence of other people, namely these churches. What is lacking with regard to the Corinthians, from Paul’s perspective is *them*. They are not there; he cannot see them or touch them. What he can embrace are the three delegates they sent. Paul cannot see the Philippians either while he is in house arrest in Rome but what he can see is Epaphroditus, whose presence embodies and brings to him the Philippians’ own presence. So Paul says they are filling up what was lacking. With that in mind, come back to Colossians chapter 1 and hear these words again. Paul says,

“Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh (in my body) what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, (and I do it) for the sake of his body, which is the church.”

So what is still lacking in regard to the afflictions of Christ? Not the power of the Cross but the *presence* of the Cross in the pagan world as Paul knew it. Let not forget that Jesus' crucifixion was just a routine Roman execution, just another day's work: there was no fanfare, no announcement, no ad in the paper—get on with it, throw the guy's body in a tomb, move on with Roman history. Who saw it?—just a little handful of people. So, it is the presence of the Cross; so few people saw the Cross. Where is Jesus now? He is not walking about carrying the crucifix on his back as we sometimes see some of his followers doing, or, plastered up on a crucifix in a church building. Where is Jesus?—he is resurrected and glorified and seated at the Father's right hand. So ask yourself how is it that God is going to make the Cross known in the ancient pagan world; Jesus died, was buried and raised: now how will God make the presence of the Cross known?

God says: I know what I am going to do; I am going to grab a guy named Paul. In fact, I'm going to blow him down on the road to Damascus, blind him for a spell, and then I am going to commission him to go out. And I am going to tell him it is necessary that he is going to suffer for my name. He is going to go around the Mediterranean world meeting the needs of people through his proclamation and preaching, and getting harassed, beat up—the forty lashes minus one—and shipwrecked, nearly stoned to death and more. Everywhere he goes he is carrying around the death of Jesus so that he might make the death of Jesus known—and the life of Jesus. What is lacking with regard to the afflictions of Christ that Paul fills up in his body?—the presence of the Cross of Christ, and it is filled up through Paul's suffering. Paul can see that and that is why he rejoices.

So he goes into the Galatians churches early in his ministry; he had just nearly been stoned to death, killed with rocks in Lystra. He goes in to Galatia. By that time, he had no doubt been whipped in synagogues for being a little dodgy on the Jewish law and practice. He goes in there all beat up and harassed and probably with physical deformities: imagine being beat up with rocks thrown at you putting you near your death. How beat up and physically deformed you would be!—or the thirty-nine lashes across your back so that you can hardly wear a shirt: it stinging so much with blood and scars. Paul goes into the Galatian cities and communities, proclaims the Gospel and wins them to faith. Then he writes to them later when they are on the verge of apostasy, in chapter 3:1—“You foolish Galatians!” —What are you doing? “Who has bewitched you?” —Someone has cast a spell over you to lead you astray. Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. That is what he says: You saw the crucified Christ publicly, tangibly, visibly. How did they see the crucified Christ publicly, tangibly and visibly? It is interesting at the end of Galatians in 6:17, right at the verse before the “Grace and peace” closing, he gives his last argument in the letter: “Finally, let no one cause me trouble,” — why? —“. . . because I bear on my body the marks of Jesus”, all tattooed as it were, not with funky dragon heads and stuff but with scars and whippings. So, these Galatian churches would have seen that: they would have seen in the crucified Paul the crucified Christ. That is how God chose to make known the Cross of Christ throughout the ancient world!

So let me ask you: How is God going to make known the Cross of Christ in Oak Park, or in your family, or at the Oak Park River Forest High School? How is the Cross of Christ, as Paul says, publicly portrayed in your work place, on your street, in your neighborhood? How? By you and me following in the footsteps of Paul, and bearing the suffering that is coming our direction to serve and meet the needs of other people. And as we are stepping out and doing something risky for the Gospel, incurring pain and suffering because we are taking up the Cross

and following Jesus, the world is watching. They see this paradox all of a sudden come in your life. Yes, they can understand suffering, pouting because of suffering. What the world cannot understand is rejoicing because of what is suffered “for you,” like Paul says.

There is a lot being written these days about “missional church living”: how the church can be really cool and sexy in the culture. Some of it is okay, some less than. Do you want to know how to do missional living so that the Gospel is seen in the world? The way we do it is by rejoicing in our hardships; that is the one thing the world cannot do! It is the one thing that the world cannot figure out—one of these great paradoxes that only is possible because of the Holy Spirit that God loves to pour out, as he says in Thessalonians: You embrace the Gospel with much affliction and suffering with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

That is the paradox of the Christian living: rejoicing in the midst of suffering! That is an amazing witness and testimony to the world, to folks in Oak Park, students to the folks at the High School, to younger folks and seniors, to everybody! To take your struggles and direct them “for you,” as it were, for the body of Christ, for the sake of other people who haven’t even seen me personally, taking the hardships in your life and taking risks that you know are going to bring hardships, extending yourself, finding the suffering coming, rejoicing in the midst of it and people are going to say, “That doesn’t look so good. That looks like a crucifixion!” Then there is the suffering is mixed in there, the simultaneous presence of sadness and utter joy! Just imagine the witness you would have as a student or in your work environment with hardships that bring great sadness; and yet there is this utter joy that is working through you and flows out from you. That is a powerful Gospel witness that cannot be denied by the world.

We can Rejoice in Our Suffering because it is Part of God’s Plan

So how do we rejoice in suffering? We do so because we see our suffering as making Christ known and as part of God’s bigger plan. The bigger plan part is what Paul says in verses 25 and 27; God has a bigger plan: suffering is part of it. The bigger plan is he wants to make known what Paul says here is the mystery: the mystery, verse 26, that has been kept hidden for ages and generations. It is this amazing thing that God has been so excited to reveal to the world but he has kept it hidden in his own wisdom. He said: I’m going to keep this mystery hidden for a while but now, in the times of the New Testament, it is being disclosed to the saints through the sufferings of Paul and all who had followed his legacy. Through them God has chosen to make known to the Gentiles this glorious riches of this mystery, which is: Christ in you, the hope of resurrection glory!

So that is the bigger plan for your life, that you would be making known the Christ in you: the hope of resurrection glory. And the way we do that is by manifesting the Cross to other people through our own hardship and rejoicing in the midst of it so they can see both the crucifixion and the resurrection—the simultaneous presence of crucifixion sadness and resurrection joy in your life and mine. That is a powerful witness; that is what this passage is teaching us.

Conclusion

There is a profoundly unchristian thinker who said at one point a profoundly Christian thing. The profoundly unchristian thinker was Frederick Nietzsche, the atheistic German

philosopher. The profoundly Christian thing he said was this: "He who has a 'Why' to live can bear with almost any 'How.'" He who can see the grand design, who can see the scheme, the plan and the purposes in it—if you have that, you can endure and bear up under almost any 'How.' This morning we have seen what the 'Why' is. It is to make known the Cross of Christ and the resurrection through our suffering. God has a purpose and a plan in Paul's life, and for your life, and for my life: to make known the person and the work of the life of Christ. Him we proclaim, teaching and admonishing everyone with all wisdom. To this end I labor, struggling with all of his energy that he so mightily works within me. This is God's purpose and plan for Paul and for you and me: to manifest the presence of Christ and the resurrection glory of Christ.

Amen.

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