
Indispensable Suffering

Colossians 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

After expressing his prayer for the Colossian church and reminding them again of both the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ in all things, Paul now turns to the issue of his ministry to the church. He begins in a very interesting way, speaking of the joy he has in suffering for the sake of the Colossians and how his suffering is "filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." This verse deserves our special attention for several reasons. First, we as a people here in America often struggle with the idea that suffering would be an expected part of life, particularly life in Christ. Secondly, while we might come to accept suffering as a part of life, we would struggle to see how we could rejoice in it. Lastly, the phrase, "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" is confusing if not disturbing to us. So as we study this verse, we must answer the questions, "What is this suffering?" and "Why is there joy?"

I. What is This Suffering?

The suffering about which Paul speaks cannot have any atoning efficacy, for Paul has already made clear in verses 13-23 that Christ's work of redemption was complete. He also doesn't seem to be speaking about the general suffering that comes from living in a fallen world, where the effects of sin permeate everything. No, this seems to be a specific suffering tied to the advancement of the Gospel as Christ builds His Church through His people.

II. Why is There Joy?

Paul can rejoice in these sufferings because he understands what the Lord is doing through him. The discomfort, struggles, conflicts, and even persecutions he faces have an eternal purpose. He knows that through these sufferings grace is extending to more and more people, resulting in thanksgiving and glory to God (2 Corinthians 4:15). And he knows that he is getting the great privilege of sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Philippians 3:10) as the death and life of Jesus are being manifested in his body (2 Corinthians 4:10).

Discussion Questions

1. How is it clear from Colossians 1:13-23 that Paul doesn't see any deficiency in Christ's atoning work?
2. In other places in Paul's letters (Ephesians 3:1, 13; 2 Timothy 2:8-10) he speaks about suffering for the sake of others. How do these other verses explain more fully what Paul means when he says that he is suffering "for your sake"?
3. In Mark 8:31-35 and John 15:18-27, Jesus connected His suffering with that of His disciples. What are the implications of that for believers today?
4. What are some of the reasons we are reluctant to suffer for the sake of the Gospel?

5. In 2 Corinthians 4:7-18, Paul gives a fuller description of this suffering for the sake of the Gospel. What are the things in these verses that encourage you?

Going Deeper

1. How have you experienced discomfort, struggle, conflict, or rejection for the work of the Gospel?
2. What is the benefit of sharing in Christ's sufferings?