

Suffer for the Body – February 3, 2018

[slide] In last week's passage 1:21-23, [slide] We saw where our Colossians had been [alienated from God], where they were now [reconciled to God] and where they were going [presented by King Jesus, faultless, before the throne of God], and some wrong turns to avoid [taking a detour from the faith, moving away from the Gospel's hope]. We could say Paul marked the Colossian's position on the map of Salvation History.

And so pressing on and for the benefit of the Colossian Christians **Paul marks his own position on the map of salvation history**- which runs from the end of 1:23 all the way to 2:5. There's a lot of *autobiographical info about Paul and his ministry.*

And I think that there may be a tendency for those of us reading this part of the letter to think [slide]: "Hey this is just stuff from Paul about his own personal calling and ministry," *Then we can dismiss it as not applicable to our routine, non-apostolic lives.* We are unimportant people in this Kingdom of God thing. But **Paul is superhuman in his faith and ministry.** In the great drama of the Kingdom of God we're walk-on roles, but Paul's a leading man. Paul's calling takes up the whole of his life. It's more important and more demanding than any "calling" we might have. And, frankly, *we're OK with that.* Cause sure, we want to follow Jesus, but there's other stuff we want to do too.

In case you didn't catch it: I was going for irony. God's expectation of your allegiance to Him, your faith and practice, is no less demanding than God's expectations on Paul. "You and Paul are both running the same "faith and practice app" – there is no "free version, or upgrade.

Paul is not bragging. His rehearsing of his sufferings and successes is intended to **encourage [slide] his readers to follow his example!!**

Phil. 3:17 Join with others in following my example, brothers [&sisters], **Phil. 4:9** Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. **1Cor. 11:1** Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. [also 1Cor 4:15]

Paul on [slide] trial in Acts 26 says **29** ..."I would wish to God, that ...all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains." Paul wants and expects his readers to live his example to **"become such as I am."**

While studying this last bit of ch1 I began to wonder if our **perceived distance** between the scope of Paul's calling and our own might be emphasized by choices made by bible translators.

For instance [slide] in 1:23 & 24 Paul refers to himself as a *diakonos* of the Gospel and a *diakonos* of the Church. The primary meaning of *diakonos* is **"servant."** A 2ndary meaning is "one appointed to minister." [Acts 6/Stephen--In Catholic, Orthodox or Episcopalian an ordained minister of a rank below a priest]. The translators can choose between Paul naming himself "servant" or "minister."

Minister is their choice. To our 21st century American ears **minister says "religious professional** –a position of some superiority.

[slide] But here's a thing **Epaphras** [1:7] and **Tychicus** [4:7] both part of Paul's ministry team, are both referred to as **diakonos**- but translators chose **"servant"** for them, rather than **"minister."** *This is an opinion* but to my mind that translation choice elevates Paul over Epaphras and Tychicus in a way Paul would have disliked because *it creates a "perceived distance" between us and Paul.*

Another contributing factor to this “perceived distance” may be the “extra English words” added to the text to help the reader’s understanding. In the NASB these “extra words” are all *italicized*. Consider the added words [slide] In 1:25. It reads: **25** *Of this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out **the preaching of** the word of God,

So, change minister to “servant,” take out “of this church,” and “the preaching of the...” and suddenly this verse isn’t just about *Paul the Church leader and Preacher*. [slide] Listen: **25** ...I was made a [servant] according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out... the word of God... Suddenly the “perceived distance” is gone and Paul’s self- description can apply to EVERY follower of Jesus.

Anyone in this room who’s given their lives to Jesus could make that statement.

We’re going to take a couple weeks to work through two or three topics in 1:24-2:5] And the assumption I’ll be making as we do is that [slide] God’s expectations of your faith and practice are the same as His expectations of Paul’s faith and practice- that the things Paul is doing are also things we- in some fashion- should be doing That’s why Paul can say: **Phil. 4:9** Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And **1Cor. 11:1** Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

[slide] Now we all talk a lot about our sufferings big and small. Stories of struggle and pain and hardship are always more interesting than stories about lounging on a white sand beach with a fruity drink. Customer service stats show we will talk about bad service we got dozens of times but good service only a few. Rebekah and I dropped in to visit with Dave & Peggy and we talked about –in great detail including scans and visual aids-every bit of his current medical situation. A favorite poem from Robert Browning Hamilton:

I walked a mile with Pleasure; She chatted all the way; But left me none the wiser For all she had to say.

I walked a mile with Sorrow; And ne’er a word said she; But, oh! The things I learned from her, When Sorrow walked with me.

The truth is we *know* suffering makes us wiser than pleasure ever could. But we just don’t like it. **And yet Paul writes: Col. 1:24** Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.

There’s some challenging stuff in this one verse. So let’s take this apart. First:

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I. ...I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church...

Consider this: **what is true of Christ is true of his people** [Wright]. This is something Paul has understood from the moment Jesus grabbed him on the Damascus Road and stopped him from persecuting the Church. **4** ...“Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” **5** he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He *said*, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,

Paul knows that **Jesus and the church are one in the same**. In 1:24 His body, Christ’s body is clearly stated to be the Church. Later in Col. [slide]

Paul will say: **2:12** having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. **13** When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, [slide]

3:1 Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, **4** When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

And from Peter 1Pet 4:13 But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Somehow, some way His Life is our life and his Death is our Death and so his suffering is our suffering. *What is true of Christ is true of his people. This should not surprise us because four times in this letter [and in many others] Paul says the Church IS the body of Christ. Col. 1:18* He is also head of the **body**, the church... God still takes on flesh in the world by the presence of the Holy Spirit within YOU as the Body of Christ. What is true of Christ is true of his people.

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II. Christ's afflictions. [Messiah's afflictions, or the afflictions of the King]

Paul does not see Christ's suffering and death as lacking anything regarding our redemption. Nor does Paul see his suffering as being part of redeeming anyone else.

Something else is going on here and it's tied closely to point #1 [What's true of Christ is true of his people].

Behind Paul's statement in v24 [slide] there is an ancient Jewish belief that some call "**The Messianic Woes.**" It begins with the idea [known to both Jesus & Paul] that the world's history is divided into "**this present evil age**" and "**the age to come**" [the Messianic Age]. The transition between the two ages was to be a time of great suffering through which Israel and the world would pass to reach the age to come

This suffering these "**messianic woes**" were the preliminary to the age of the Messiah. In Jesus' day the "suffering servant" passages [Is53] were understood as a picture of Israel suffering on the way to the "**Age to come.**"

[slide] But it didn't happen that way. Jesus died and rose from the dead -the beginning, the firstborn from the dead- right in the middle of "**this present evil age.**" With his resurrection, the "**New Creation**" erupted right through the middle of "**this present evil age.**"

These **two ages have been and will be struggling against each other** until Jesus comes again; marking the period between Jesus Resurrection and his return- what we also call The Church Age- as *a time of Great suffering and tribulation.* [slide]

Because **as these two ages and their agents struggle there will be suffering for the Body of Christ.** As Jesus was marked by his scars so we, his people, will be marked by suffering, the Messianic Woes, the King's Afflictions [persecution and misfortune].

This is what Paul is talking about. **And it shouldn't be a surprise to any of us.** We are the followers of a crucified Messiah. The world's reconciliation was achieved when he suffered a horrible execution at the hands of folks who didn't like his message.

"If the hope of Israel's story is to be found in a suffering servant and Jesus is that suffering servant, it is not surprising that suffering is integral to the life of anyone who embraces this story as their own." – Walsh/Keesmat

As we've said: The Church is the Body of Christ. And *what is true of Christ is true of his people.* And what happened to Christ's body during his ministry? Disdain, shunning, rumors, harassment, oppression, hunger, homelessness, threats, beating, scourging, and a lynching approved by the Empire. We are his followers in a world hostile to Him, should we expect any less?

Considering all that what sort of response does Paul model for our example . [slide]

III. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake

This is not a “one off” comment from Paul. In Ephesians Paul says don’t feel bad about my “tribulations **on your behalf**” [3:13]. He tells Timothy he “endures all things **for the sake of those who are chosen**” [2Tim 2:10]. And in 2Cor he writes about God **1:4** who comforts us in all our troubles, so that **we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. 5** For just as **the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives**, so also **through Christ our comfort overflows. And the crazy fact is: Paul has endured a lot of suffering in his ministry- beatings, hunger, robbers, shipwrecks, stoning [2Cor 11:24-29]. And still he gets glad.**

Paul understands that we are the Body of Christ and *what is true of Christ is true of his people*. In a world that is hostile to the rule of King Jesus, his followers –including Paul– will experience affliction- whether from mortal rulers and authorities or spiritual ones- and it brings them Joy. Remember the disciples leaving the Sanhedrin after being beaten. . [slide] It says: **Acts 5:41** So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His name* *Suffering is exemplary of servanthood.*

For Paul, too, **suffering marks us out as belonging to Jesus** which is something to be [slide] glad about. **Phil 3: 8** ...I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, **10** I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

We can rejoice like Paul in our own sufferings [not stupidly or flippantly] but hopefully because they are signs we belong to Jesus. AND as we [slide] said earlier “...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 birthpangs of this new age are being worked out in them.” [N.T. Wright] But there’s another reason for Paul’s Joy...

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IV. ...in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in **filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.**

Just a few verses back Paul told us Jesus reconciled us to God “in His fleshly body through death” [1:21]. Just as Jesus reconciled us by **his fleshly body**, Paul says he does his share **in his flesh** to fill up what’s lacking in **the afflictions of the King.**

Paul applies to himself the same pattern of suffering on behalf of others that was worked out on the cross. Jesus suffered for others and Paul falls in line with Him.

Wall and Wright both hear in Paul’s words the idea that ***there may be a fixed amount of suffering*** Christ’s body [the Church- you and I] will have to pass through to attain “**The age to come.**”

As we are in Christ and Christ is in us –in a sense, it is Christ’s afflictions that are being completed. **Paul certainly sounds as if he sees his own troubles and trials as whittling down the amount of the King’s Afflictions left to be suffered.**

Now, this idea of the Messianic Woes being a fixed amount of suffering is impossible to prove. So we don’t want to hang on to that too tightly. It’s an interesting idea, but maybe nothing more.

But what’s important here is the example Paul gives us to be worked out in our own lives. [slide] Paul is willing to take the hit of struggle and hardship, and oppression and affliction for the sake of the

other. And he appears to be happy to take on as much suffering as possible in hopes of sparing others.

He rejoices about his suffering *for their sake*.

He does his share of suffering physically as a benefit to the church body.

How would your life change if you followed Paul's example in this? What if when some difficulty came into your life, instead of hardening up, getting angry, frustrated, resisting or despairing- you said: **Thank you for this, Lord!** *I am glad because this trial marks me as a servant of yours. Help me to react to this in a way that will glorify you and eliminate another patch of suffering from the world.*

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On one of the best selling Christian Albums of all time: **Barry McGuire's concert album "To The Bride"** he gives a little mini sermon about **Jesus as a shock absorber**- how through his death he absorbed all the shock of human lawlessness and rebellion. And in Him, we, as His body on earth, also become shock absorbers. There are shock waves of hatred, fear destruction rolling through our world.

But with Jesus in us we can open up to that shock because Jesus has already received. If we don't open up to the shock and allow Him to absorb it through us it'll bounce off of us with more energy and go on to destroy someone else. In the most basic sense it's exactly what Paul is talking about.

This is, in fact, precisely who we are in Christ. **We're supposed to be the ones who pour ourselves out for the other**- the ones who absorb shock waves of hate, fear, violence so they are eliminated from the world, **the ones who consider others more important than ourselves**, who imitate Jesus by being a suffering servant like he was and being glad for it.

If that seems crazy it may be because much of the Church has forgotten that it is the body of a crucified Messiah. [slide]

If we embrace Him as Lord in a world hostile to his Lordship then **it will do us good to follow Paul's example of rejoicing in our sufferings** and doing our share to remove as many of the Kings afflictions from the world for the sake of his body which is the Church.

