



Title: The Purpose of Suffering (Colossians: week 8)

Text: Colossians 1:24-29

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Intro: In this message we wrestle with one of the most baffling and intriguing verses in the entire Bible. In Colossians 1:24, Paul says that he rejoices in suffering because he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. What does he mean by that? The implications are huge, and help us form a biblical theology of the purposes behind suffering.

Three ways to view God's relationship with suffering:

1. God is vindictive (karma)
2. God is limited (dualism)
3. God is sovereign (biblical)

THREE QUESTIONS:

1. WHAT DOES PAUL MEAN WHEN SAYS THAT IN HIS SUFFERING HE IS FILLING UP WHAT IS LACKING IN CHRIST'S AFFLICTIONS?

1. Important lesson on how to read and understand the Bible.

- When we try to interpret difficult and seemingly contradictory verses, we must first look at the Bible itself to see what it says about that issue. In other words, individual verses do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they are part of a larger context.
- Concentric circles—the chapter/passage, the book/letter, the author, the entire Bible.

2. What it obviously does not mean.

That the redemptive suffering of Jesus on the cross is incomplete or to be supplemented by Paul or us. We can be confident of this because:

1. Colossians 1:12-14; 19-20; 2:13-14
2. Every other NT author says the same—Heb 10:14

3. What I think Paul is saying.

What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ's afflictions is not yet known and trusted in the world. His suffering is still hidden to many people. And God's intention is to reveal this mystery of Christ. Thus, they are carried out by his ministers—Paul—and us—as a personal embodiment or representation of Christ to the world that needs to see the afflictions of Christ.

- Philippians 2:25-30—Epaphroditus

4. And how does this lack get filled up?

- Through Paul's suffering.
- Paul is saying here, and I think in a great bit of the rest of the New Testament, that one of the primary ways God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be demonstrated / presented to the world through the afflictions of His people.

2. HOW DOES SUFFERING GLORIFY GOD?

1. Suffering strengthens our faith and increases our holiness.

- Hebrews 12:7-17

2. It forces us to rely on God and not ourselves.

- 2 Corinthians 1:8-9

3. Suffering stirs boldness and faith in others.

- Philippians 1:12-14

4. Suffering enables us to display the surpassing worth of Jesus over this world.

- 2 Corinthians 4:7-18
- Hebrews 10:32-39
- Hebrews 12:1-3—when in our suffering we act like Jesus and look to Jesus we point this world to the surpassing worth of something far more valuable than good health or good fortune in this life.

Quote by Malcom Muggeridge:

“Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful, with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness, whether pursued or attained. In other words, if it ever were to be possible to eliminate affliction from our earthly existence by means of some drug or other medical mumbo jumbo...the result would not be to make life delectable, but to make it too banal or trivial to be endurable. This of course is what the cross of Christ signifies, and it is the cross more than anything else, that has called me inexorably to Christ.”

NOTE: The mindset of “I don’t receive that”

- John 9
- Paul’s prison episodes. One time he was rescued (Acts 16), another time he wasn’t.
- I understand the heart behind that statement, and it is full of good intention, but I think it is narrow and ultimately does not take the full view of what Scripture says about suffering.

3. HOW SHOULD WE PRAY WHEN WE ARE SUFFERING?

NOTE: I can hear someone saying—What’s wrong with you? Do you want to suffer?

- No. I don’t want to suffer and I don’t want you to suffer.
- But we will suffer. That I can guarantee you.
- What I want is for us to not miss the God-ordained opportunity to demonstrate the surpassing beauty of Christ when we do suffer
- In short, I don’t want to waste my suffering. And I don’t you to waste yours.

1. We should pray earnestly for healing and release from suffering.

- James 5:13-18

2. We should also pray knowing that God can be glorified whether we are delivered from the suffering or not.

- 2 Corinthians 12:7-10
- Romans 8:15-28—It is our privilege as adopted sons and daughters of God to cry out “Abba, Father!” But we also must pray with the humility that we don’t always know how to pray as we ought.

3. We need not shy away from this obvious tension in the Bible.

NOTE: A word about suffering from 1 Peter 4:12-19

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OUR SUFFERING AND JESUS' SUFFERING

1. Jesus suffered in our place as a substitute and sacrifice for our sins, satisfying the justice and wrath of a holy and righteous God against our willful rebellion.

2. We suffer as a display of Jesus to a broken world.

1 Peter 3:18