

Little children have a hard time behaving in church. I suppose that all grown-up stuff is outside their world, and even sermons in English often sound like Greek to them. Once I remember preaching in a church where one little boy made more of a nuisance of himself than usual. He really was having a good time! Finally, desperation took over in the Mom's life and in complete exasperation she reached over and issued the final ultimatum. "If you don't be quiet, I'm going to take you outside and spank you!" You could almost see the wheels begin to turn in that little fellow's head. Now he had a choice. With no hesitation he said, "Cone on, let's go outside."

We can learn from this story, if we will. There are many who would rather take "a whipping" than give our lives to Christ. How sad it is we don't know how to turn our suffering into joy.

TAKE YOUR BIBLES, PLEASE...

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, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (Colossians 1:24-29 ESV).

This verse of scripture in our text morning aimed at this very point. The difference in our lives as Christians and others is not the absence of suffering, but the manner in which we bear that suffering. The pathway of the Christian has often been marked by blood. Like Jesus, who has walked before us, we are often called upon to suffer. No one suffered any more than the Apostle Paul. We can learn much from the manner *in* which he suffered. It was with joy!

We should note that this autobiographical note in the Colossian letter gives us same insight into Christian suffering. The sufferings can take several forms and came at different levels. Sometimes they will be primarily physical. For Paul these took the form of hunger, thirst, coldness, imprisonment, shipwrecks, destitution, beatings, stonings, and other perils. At other times the sufferings will be more within than without, those caused by rejection, slander, humiliation, and indignities. At times they will be vicarious in the form of sorrow, anguish, and concern because you share with others at such a deep level of love.

At whatever level the sufferings may come, the Christian bears them with joy. Paul was rejoicing in the midst of his suffering. While it would be wrong to say that he was necessarily rejoicing because of them, yet he had joy in them. Just because they were received as a result of his Christian faith did not keep them from hurting. But his Christian faith kept him rejoicing even while hurting. We have not suffered much. Many of us have not suffered well. What little suffering we have endured has not been with joy. We have borne it with self-pity and complaints. Understanding Paul's view of his suffering could be of help to us in bearing our sufferings with joy. **There are three principles involved here.**

First, We Can Suffer with Joy Because of the Purpose of the Sufferings (v. 24a).

Even Paul would not bear all suffering with joy. Sufferings brought about by wrongdoing could not be borne with joy. They would rather be borne with the sorrow of repentance and remorse. Weeping, not joy is in order when you are suffering because of wrong you have done. These sufferings in which Paul is rejoicing are of a different kind and for a different purpose. They have not come to him because of some failure in his life or because of some moral transgression. Rather they have come to him as a result of his success in carrying out an assignment given to him by God. God has called him to serve as the minister of the Gospel and a minister of the church. His sufferings are the result of this ministry. Even as he wrote this letter, he is chained in a Roman prison. The only crime with which he has been charged is consorting with Gentiles. He is suffering "for you", that is, for the Christian church in Colossae.

He adds in further explanation, "...for the sake of his body, that is, the church." In seeking to understand these words, two things seem to be clear.

1. *The sufferings of Paul were directly related to his pursuing the will of God for his life.* He was called to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles. His commitment to fulfill this calling angered the Jews and brought down upon him an avalanche of suffering. But if doing the will of God brings suffering, surely it can be endured with joy. Doing the will of God will often result in this very thing. There is no guarantee that if you do the will of God you will never bear any pain or carry any sorrow. The very opposite maybe true.
2. *The second thing suggested by this is that Paul considered the body of Christ, His church, worthy of his suffering.* Suffering for a worthy cause is always easier. It is when a person has lost sight of the cause, or has no cause, that the sufferings became bitter. Every mother who has walked through the valley of suffering to bring a little life into the world knows this. An awareness of the purpose of her suffering enables her to have underneath a spirit of joy. Is this not one of our problems? Have we not lost sight of the grand cause in which we are involved? Many of us have doubts about the cause really being worthy of our pain. For this reason our joy has been quenched.

Second, We Can Suffer with Joy Because of the Partnership of Our Sufferings (v. 24b).

This part of our text is one of, if not the most difficult verses of scripture to interpret. If you have ever read any of the commentaries, you would quickly see the problems. Great theological battles have been fought over these words. The question is what is the connection between our suffering and the sufferings of Christ? In what way are we filling up something that is lacking in the suffering of Jesus? We can quickly, and dogmatically, affirm that the apostle does not mean that our sufferings add anything to the sufferings of Christ in atoning of the sins of the world, that is an accomplished and finished fact. Our sufferings have no such merit before God. Paul is not equating his sufferings to those of Christ. Those sufferings were "once for all" and declared "finished" by the Lord Himself, from the cross. **What then can we see two things in this complex statement of the apostle.**

1. *We can see a partnership in suffering. Christ is so joined with His people that when they suffer, their sufferings are His sufferings.* Paul had received this truth at the very outset of his Christian experience. The lord of glory had said to him there on the Damascus road, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" While his rage had been directed toward the humble

Jewish disciples of Christ, he had actually been persecuting the risen Christ Himself. The risen Christ was so closely joined to and identified with His people. Could this not be a source of joy? Surely any heart would be lifted up by such an awareness of oneness with the glorious lord of us all. He feels and knows our pain when we are suffering for doing His will. He knows. He makes our pain His very own.

2. *We can also see another aspect of this partnership in suffering. From this same Roman prison Paul prayed that "I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." (cf. Philippians 3:10). As Jesus pursued the will of God, he encountered sufferings. Now Paul is being allowed to experience the same type of sufferings.* In this manner He is made more aware of just what his lord endured. He is also being made aware that it is His privilege to be like Him. He is suffering like His lord. He presently knows the fellowship of His sufferings. We know so little of this fellowship. It is a privilege to be allowed in this company. To the Philippians Paul wrote, "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake." (Philippians 1:29). Such a view of suffering for Christ will surely take some of the sting out of the bitter words, and will relieve some of the pain of the blows.

Third, We Can Suffer with Joy Because of the Profit of the Sufferings (v. 24c).

Christians do not suffer in vain. They serve a God who can turn their sufferings into something profitable for the cause of Christ in the world. It was this conviction that enabled Paul to spend his days in the Roman prison in joy. There is an allusion to sane profit to be accrued from the sufferings in Paul's reference to the suffering being for the body of Christ, His church. Paul fully expects that even these days of imprisonment will bring benefit to the churches.

1. *There are really two sides to this profit to be gained through suffering. There is the personal side.* Anytime we suffer for Christ we are the better for it now and will be the better in eternity. *Paul writes of this to the Romans, "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also; knowing that tribulations works patience; and patience experience and experience hope." (cf. Romans 5:3,4).* Surely anything that will perform this type of ministry in our lives can be endured with joy. In addition to this, all suffering for Christ is to be rewarded at the last day when we stand in His presence.
2. *In the letter written to the Philippians, Paul reflected another profit from these very sufferings. "But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the thing which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel; so that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places."(cf. Philippians 1:12,13). This is just the way our God works. The world thinks it will do us harm, but God turns it around to make it a help.* Satan heaps upon us abuse, but God makes the abuse a validation of our witness. Satan throws the Apostle in prison, but God makes the prison the doorway to the Caesar's palace. For this reason any time a suffering comes upon us for the cause of Christ, we can expectantly look about to see how our lord will choose to use the affliction to accomplish His own purpose.

Add them up. You begin with a purpose worth suffering for; you add a partnership with our suffering Savior and then add some glorious profits. It is easy to understand why the Christians are able to suffer with joy! Let me quickly add one last thought. Don't hear me say you should go looking for suffering. Never! Rather cast yourself into the doing of the will of God with utter

abandonment. Quit considering what others may say or do. Our only consideration should be what God would have us to do, if suffering comes from doing the will of God, and then we can overcome then with joy. All of us remember Nathan Hale's last words before being executed by the British as a spy in 1776. "I regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." What are you willing to lose for your Lord... let us pray.