

## The Core: Living with Jesus at the Center

### Suffering with Him Makes the Word Heard

Colossians 1:24-26

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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, 25 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, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints (Col 1:24-26)

"When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." These words were written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor during World War II. His book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, was a compelling call to the value of personal sacrifice for the disciple of Jesus.

I find that statement very interesting especially in light of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century American version of Christianity which seems to focus more on how following Jesus fixes and fulfills your life rather than how following Jesus is really a call to self-sacrifice, trials, and dying to self. For instance, I know far more tracts whose titles are "Steps to Peace with God" or "How to have the Abundant Life" rather than a call to "Come and Die." All you would need to do is turn on your television to channel 40, and you will hear more about self-fulfillment, living a blessed life, or as one church's moniker reads "Discover the Champion in You" than you will about denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him.

It is too often the case that our understanding of Jesus' call to come and die sounds like this: "If any man would be my disciple let him deny himself when he feels like it, take up his cross if it isn't too heavy, and follow me as long as it gives you what you want." This is part of the cultural air that we breathe.

Now you might be wondering, "What is Mark's problem today?" My problem or concern is that I live in a culture that is anti-hardship, anti-suffering, and anti-inconvenience. I expect answers, quick service, and fast solutions. I want to "Google" my way through life.

Well, that is not how God works. And this contrast of approaches to life becomes crystal clear when God calls us to suffer or to minister to people when it is really hard. You see, the Bible is filled with hopeful statements about God's blessing, peace, and happiness, but often those things are tied to suffering and hardship. Jesus promised hardship (John 16:33), and we need to understand the place of suffering in the life and ministry of the believer.

We are beginning a four week examination of Jesus-centered ministry (1:24-2:8) which is the natural application of Jesus being the core or the center of everything. For the next four weeks we are going to look at how Jesus transforms ministry, and today we will see how a Jesus-centered view of life changes your perspective on tough things, tough times, and tough people. When Jesus becomes the core, it changes how you view suffering. In other words embracing the centrality of Christ changes how you view trouble, and it leads to hope, joy, and deep contentment.

Therefore, I want to give you three thoughts to think when God gives you with hardship. Or think of it this way: If Jesus is the core, how should that change my view of difficulties?

### **This is not just about me (v 24a)**

Colossians 1:24 marks an important transition in our study. Paul moves from some incredible material on the person and work of Christ to a direct message to the people at the Colossae church about his life and ministry. And in doing so, he gives us an understanding of how he views his calling and its connection to difficulty.

The key phrase here is “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.” Don’t move too quickly past this statement because it is important. Paul experienced many hardships, difficulties, and suffering in his life and ministry.

The word “rejoice” means to be well, to be happy, and to be joyfully content. The word is used all over the New Testament (74 times), and it is seen as one’s orientation or view of life. In other words, rejoicing in hardship doesn’t come from a morbid love of pain but from a deeper joy in something else—namely, Christ. Therefore, we see the Peter and John (Acts 5:41) rejoicing that they were “counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name {Jesus}.” And we hear Peter say in 1 Peter 1:8 that believers rejoice with “joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory” because they are going through God-honoring trials. Rejoice is a God-centered word.

Notice the utter absence of self-focus in the first part of this verse. Paul acknowledges that he is experiencing suffering. He doesn’t tell us what this suffering is, and that is really not his point. The point is not about suffering; the point was to talk to them about the focus of his suffering. And the focus is not on himself.

Paul saw that his suffering was “for your sake.” So Paul viewed suffering through a lens of God and others. He saw hardship as something from God (2 Cor 12:7-8) and for the benefit of others. He said the same thing in 2 Corinthians 1:3-6.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, 4 who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. 5 For as we

share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. 6  
If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your  
comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.

Therefore, the first battle that we have to fight when suffering or hardship comes is the  
tendency to become self-focused. All it takes is one word to send you off the cliff: "Why?!"  
Pain has an amazing ability to turn us inward, but when Christ is the center you see everything,  
including suffering, differently.

After the death of our daughter, I wrote an article called "Unique Temptations in Painful  
Valleys." It was an honest reflection on the internal battle with my pain-filled, self-centered  
heart.

"When you are in pain, nothing else matters. Everything stops. For a season, everyone and  
everything revolves around you. At first it is very comforting, but if you are not careful, it will be  
addicting...Freedom comes by rejoicing in the opportunity to magnify God in your darkest hour.  
In the midst of the worst, God can shine best—if you will let Him. Don't allow your pain to turn  
you inward and toward yourself. The pull is strong but shallow."

The first Jesus-centered thought that I want you to think in suffering is: This is not just about  
me.

### **My suffering could have eternal purpose (v 24b)**

The second and rather amazing thing that Paul says here is that in his flesh he is filling up what  
is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Now that should raise some interesting questions! Is Paul  
saying that Christ's suffering was not enough, complete, or sufficient? Is he suggesting that he  
improves on the Savior's suffering? Obviously, this is an important question.

First, let me tell you what this phrase cannot mean. The context (1:15-23) rules out any sense  
that Christ's life, death, or suffering was incomplete or insufficient. Paul was very clear that  
Christ had "reconciled all things...making peace by the blood of his cross" (1:20). Further, I  
don't think that it means that Christ's afflictions needed to be added to in order to improve the  
quality or the effect. In fact, I would argue that the sufferings of the sinless Son of God were  
at a level that no human being can fully understand or share. Meaning, I wouldn't be worthy to  
complete his suffering.

Secondly, what does this phrase really mean? Very simply, it means that Paul saw his  
sufferings as part of his relationship with Christ and his ministry to the Colossians. That is the  
sweet pain of suffering – it connects us to Christ and it communicates to others. In other  
words, suffering models a raw Christ-likeness.

Paul's ministry calling involved preaching and living out the centrality of the gospel, both of  
which resulted in numerous hardships and persecutions (see 2 Cor 11:23-28). And even

though he never even met the Colossian believers nor visited there (Col 1:3-4), he saw his afflictions as for their sake. His pain created their gain. They heard Paul's message, knew of his sufferings, cherished his fidelity to Christ, and they listened even more carefully to his message on the centrality and worth of Christ because he had stood the test of hardship.

How does this relate to filling up Christ's afflictions? You must understand here that Paul's view of suffering was directly connected to Christ. His suffering was sharing in the suffering of Christ. Paul heard this first-hand from Jesus on the road to Damascus. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). He must have thought, "I'm not persecuting Jesus; I'm persecuting people who follow Jesus." But there is a real sense that Jesus is personally connected to the suffering of his people. So when Jesus' people suffer, Jesus suffers.

Now why does Paul talk about suffering this way? I think it is because he wants us to see that our suffering is connected to Christ and our suffering connects others to Christ. To share in Christ's afflictions means that in my suffering I show people both what Christ is like and the power of living a Christ-centered life.

"God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people. God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering he experienced so that when we offer the Christ of the cross to people, they see the Christ of the cross in us."<sup>1</sup>

Do you see how that could radically change your view of difficulties and suffering? It means that you could personally embody Jesus to people as they watch and hear about your suffering.

Certainly this applies to overt forms of persecution or sufferings directed connected to your testimony. But I think it also applies other hardships endured for and in the name of Christ. I wouldn't want you to discount the value or the power of living out a Christ-centered approach to suffering in any area of your life.

Some people want to limit the word suffering to only refer to persecution. However Paul uses two different words for persecution and suffering in 2 Timothy 3:11 so it seems plausible to say Paul has more in mind here than just direct persecution. Certainly he does not mean suffering created by our sinful actions (see 1 Peter 5:12-19), but I would not limit the definition of suffering to only direct persecution.

Let me apply this to cancer. Let's say that over the last few weeks, you've determined in your heart that you want to live out a Jesus-centered life. Then you find out that you have cancer. So you battle through the chemotherapy, all the side effects, and the enormous fears, doubts, and struggles. But you choose to do it with a new level of focus—making Christ the core. The

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper. "Called to Suffer and Rejoice: To Finish the Aim of Christ's Afflictions." [www.desiringgod.org](http://www.desiringgod.org) August 30, 1992.

battle is twofold: survive and honor Christ. And as you do this, you are being watched. People are seeing your faith in Jesus on display right in front of their eyes. Your kids are watching. Your neighbors are watching. Your spouse is watching. And as they watch—they learn. You are making a platform for Christ in your affliction.

Now some might say, “Well, that’s not the same as a missionary being persecuted.” And I would say that’s true. However, I think we would say that a missionary on a foreign mission field who gets cancer, fights for joy, and continues to serve Christ despite his illness is genuinely suffering for Jesus. He chooses to serve in spite of his illness. My point would be that there is no real difference between that kind of service and a really sick Mom who gets cancer, fights for joy, and continues to serve Christ as a mother despite her illness.

I think Paul’s point here is what suffering displays, not just the source of it.

Consider a wife who chooses every Sunday to come to church alone. Her husband not only refuses to come with her, but he does little things to make it known that he’s not supportive. He begs her to stay home on Sunday, and then he’s obviously frustrated as she gets ready for worship. His verbal silence, sighs, and emotional distance are all subtle weapons that he uses to try to get what he wants. Sometimes he even throws in a zinger – “I don’t know why you go anyway; it doesn’t make any difference in you.” At church she must navigate the kind but painful questions, “I don’t see Jim anymore, is everything okay?” On her drive home she knows that her husband missed what she experienced in worship with God’s people, and that he won’t even ask how worship was. And as she walks up to the door of her house, with a heart loaded with disappointment and pain she prays, “Jesus, help me love my husband.” She walks through the door and with a Christ-like love says, “Honey, I’m home!”

Let me tell you. That is a woman who is showing Christ to her husband despite some significant pain. Sure she’s not going to be martyred for her faith. But she is suffering, and her suffering has eternal purpose.

### **My ministry is to make Word heard (v 24b-26)**

Finally, I want to point your attention to the last half of verse 24 through verse 26 where Paul identifies that God-given nature of his ministry to proclaim the Word. I think that these verses about the specific calling or ministry that God had given Paul, and I think it is connected to the concept of suffering. Let me show you what I mean.

First, notice that verse 26 identifies that there is a “mystery hidden for ages and generations and now revealed to his saints.” What is this? It is the gospel! It is the divine plan of God to reconcile to himself those who would put their trust in Christ. As you will see next week in Nate Irwin’s message it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” a message that we are to take to the nations, and a message that is still unclear to the world (2 Cor 4:3).

Second, Paul saw his life as a stewardship that God had given him for the benefit of others. He calls himself a “minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you.” His perspective is really important. His focus was on the fact he was a steward of a ministry that God had chosen for him, and it was for the benefit of others. Central to Paul’s ministry was the declaration of the gospel and suffering.

“...He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:15-16)

Third, Paul saw his ministry (which included hardship) as “to make the Word of God fully known.” His life’s calling was to find ways reach anyone with the message of the gospel and to unpack it clearly and powerfully. This certainly involved the clear teaching or communication of the gospel message. That is part of it.

But I think that making the Word of God fully known also relates to the hardships and sufferings Paul faced. You cannot separate the man and the message. Paul’s ministry was always characterized by a clear communication of the gospel and an indomitable perseverance in the midst of suffering.

This is what happens when Christ becomes the core. Your trust and hope in the gospel allows you to not only declare the message of the Word, but it also allows you to live out the message of the Word. In other words, there is no better time to show the power of trusting in Christ than when you are suffering deeply. Christ, as the core, is not only sufficient to save you from your sins; he is sufficient to be trusted in the midst of very hard times. And that what the world notices: a life rooted in the gospel that weathers the storms of life.

Listen carefully to me. Suffering is one of the most powerful times in your life to make the Word heard. People listen to people in the vice of hardship. They watch how you live. They stand amazed at the power that rests within your heart. They want to know how you do it. They are covetous (in a good sense) of what you have.

I know that there are some of you here today who are deeply suffering, and you may wonder about the point of your pain. I cannot tell you all of the reasons, but I can tell you that this is a defining moment of your life. You have the opportunity to make the Word heard. So don’t give up.

I’ve used the phrase “Jesus Can” to summarize the faith-filled hope that comes when Jesus is the core. And this morning I want you to see that your life says something powerful when you take a hit, bounce up, and say “Jesus Can.” And I want you to see how powerful it really is for you to keep getting back up with a deep commitment to the centrality of Christ.

Suffering makes the Word of God heard. People don't want to hear from silver-spooned, easy-street people how they made it through tough times. They want to hear from and they watch people who are in the crucible of suffering because they want to know if Jesus really can!

Jesus centered ministry means that you view hardship through a new lens:

- This is not just about me
- My suffering could have eternal purpose
- My ministry is to make the Word heard

And all of this flows out of having Christ at the core. A Jesus-centered life changes your view of everything—especially suffering.

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*God, help me to be holy even though I'm hurting!*

## Unique Temptations in Painful Valleys

*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13).*

Pain creates unique temptations. For example, has someone's grief or expression of pain ever made you uncomfortable because it seemed sinful? Have you ever heard something come out of a hospital-ridden patient's mouth and thought, "That was wrong...they should not say that!" Have you ever handed someone a tissue that was "venting," but as you provided comfort, you wished that they could vent without cursing?

My guess is that if you have ever faced those situations, you did what most people do – nothing. Instead you forced a smile, affirmingly nodded your head, or rubbed their shoulder. You did not feel

comfortable saying, “Umm, I love you and I know you are in pain. But you’re sinning.” Can you even imagine saying that in the receiving line at a funeral home? You can’t, and there’s a reason why.

There is something about sinful expressions at times of deep personal pain that we justify, tolerate or even call “healthy.” Pain causes scary emotions that have never been felt before. It puts you in a dark valley where you wonder if you are ever going to feel “normal” again. Somehow we think that it would be worse to keep those feelings bottled up inside. Expressing what we really feel, even if it is sinful, at first seems therapeutic, even courageous. But it is not.

Painful experiences do not give us an exception clause on obedience. There is no pain so great that it justifies sin. Hurting people face a real problem in that few will dare tell you that you are sinning when you are really hurting.

The reason is that it seems almost insensitive to admonish or confront someone when grief or hurt turns sinful. Yet, the temptation to sin during a moment of pain is incredibly strong. Pain tests our conviction that God want us to holy – always.

“But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in **all your conduct**, because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15-16). The valley of pain presents two paths – one is self-centered, the other is God centered. Turning pain into a platform for worship means discovering how to be holy even though you are hurting. How do you do that?

**1. Embrace the fact that there is never an excuse to be sinful.** Since the Garden of Eden, mankind has been on a relentless pursuit to shift blame and excuse actions. We find convenient ways to justify or explain why we are the one exception to the rule. But freedom is not found this way.

Freedom comes from cherishing the promises of God in Scripture – as in 1 Corinthians 10:13. “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

There are four promises here. Paul says (1) You are not alone in your struggles; (2) God is faithful; (3) You are never given more than what you can bear (regardless of how you feel); and (4) God will make a



way for you to endure this. Freedom does not come from excuses or exceptions, but from clinging to these promises and learning to endure. It comes from a deep-seated commitment that there is no pain so great that justifies being sinful. None.

**2. Realize how much easier it is to be self-centered when you are in pain.** When you are in pain, nothing else matters. Sleep, food, job responsibilities, bills, and anything else besides pain seem trite, pointless and worthless. Everything stops. For a season, everyone and everything revolves around you. At first, it is very comforting, but if you are not careful, it will be addicting.

It is very easy to let your heart run to the conclusion that nothing, except this pain and your hurt, really matters. During this season of life, don't be surprised if the rawness of your life seems to make you easily offended and unusually intolerant of others. Don't be surprised if old temptations come back. When you are hurting, you are particularly vulnerable to any temptation that offers to fill the painful hole in your heart.

The fight for righteousness in pain is a fight to be concerned about more than just you. A passion to make much of Christ has to eclipse your natural and normal (but sinful) bent to make much of you. That is why Paul could say that he was hard-pressed, but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken, and struck down but not destroyed (2 Cor 4:8-9). He lived (especially in pain) for this purpose: "...that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our body...that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor 4:10-11). So, in your pain, check your heart often. You have to, because very few will dare do it for you.

**3. Patiently and vigorously fight self-exalting temptations, knowing that Jesus understands and is working all this for your good.**

The challenge is to turn potentially self-embracing pain to Christ-exalting worship. You do this by celebrating the God-ordained valley as for your good. "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory..." (2 Cor 4:17). The result is hope. "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16).

Freedom comes by rejoicing in the opportunity to magnify God in your darkest hour. In the midst of the worst, God can shine best - if you let Him. Don't allow your pain to turn you inward and toward yourself. The pull is strong, but shallow. Rather, "Count it all joy my brethren when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.... (James 1:2)." Cry out to Christ who has promised that you will never be alone (Ps. 23:4, Matt 28:20); that he understands (Heb 4:15) and that he will work all this out to make you more like him (Rom. 8:28-29). Embrace him, not yourself.

**Turn your pain into worship by being holy even when hurting.**