



# The Mystery of Christian Suffering

**Col 1:24-26 (NKJV)** – *'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.'*

If you are in the middle of the greatest trial of your life this message is for you and it will make a lot of sense. If not, you may find this message uncomfortable and not want to hear it, but you may need it one day.

- a. The book of Colossians may be one of the most difficult books in the Bible. Paul had no personal relationship with the Colossian Christians. He'd never been to that part of the region, and Paul was writing from prison. A verse like Col 1:24 is difficult. There is no other verse like this in the writings of Paul. If you read a letter from someone you've never met, and he is a prisoner awaiting his sentence, possibly execution, and he is trying to tell you how to live, would you listen to him?
- b. A group of Judaisers followed Paul everywhere he went and turned Paul's converts against him. Paul was fighting an uphill battle here. He said to Timothy, *'Do not be ashamed of Jesus Christ or for my chain.'* This was part of Paul's suffering, writing from prison. Paul accepted this suffering and faced it head-on. *On the day Paul was converted he was given a prophecy about how much he would suffer for Jesus Christ. What a prophecy at conversion!* (C.f. Acts 9:16)

## 1. Two Main Levels of Suffering for Christians

- a. **Sufferings of Christ:** Suffering for the sake of Christ or suffering for the gospel. This suffering is at the top and stands on its own. This is as good as it gets on earth as followers of Christ! *C.f. 1 Cor 4:9-13 – To this present hour we hunger and thirst, and we are poorly dressed, we labour with our own hands, we are reviled, persecuted, when we are slandered, we answer kindly, we are the scum of the world, etc.* It is the 'suffering that comes into your life as a direct result of making choices for God in faith.' If you feel you have never suffered for Christ, don't worry. I believe it is changing quickly. Read the Book of Revelation.
- b. **Mysterious Sufferings for Believers:** There is another level of suffering that applies to all Christians. It takes many forms and levels. E.g. common trials & disappointments, betrayal, physical suffering, financial reversal, family (marriage) problems, etc. If you are in pain for any reason - apart as a direct result of your own sin - this applies to you. Paul calls it, filling up in what was lacking in Christ's affliction for His body [church], which he calls 'mystery.' 'Mysterious reasons for believer's suffering [the church].'

Suffering has been allotted to Christ, i.e. the affliction of Christ - a certain quota and certain quality of sufferings to be fulfilled. Christ has left a part of his affliction and graciously extended an invitation to the church to suffer with Him as part of our holy calling. This suffering has nothing to do with our salvation. Christ's suffering was complete for our salvation, but it has to do with intimacy with Christ. C.f. Paul: *'fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...'* (Phil 3:10)

There is a certain amount of suffering God is looking for in His people that they will suffer well (in a godly manner like Christ) and not complain. C.f. Predestined to suffer: *'that no one should be shaken by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed to this.'* (1 Thess 3:3) 'For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake...' (Phil 1:30)

After 2,000 years, there is a place for you too. Why? Too many people complain and do not suffer well. Right now, some estimate that ~200 million Christians are suffering for their faith around the world. Most people complain and do not suffer well. They do not fill up in their own body the suffering of Christ. This is an important aspect of understanding the end-time church needs to understand.

'What do you mean by that?' Read the book of Revelation: *'Here is the patience of the saints...'* Why did Job suffer? Job never found out why. It was a mystery to the end. But Job's suffering began when God boasted of Job. The angels were watching with abated breath how Job's faith came out. *'How you react to any kind of suffering will qualify you for the particular suffering.'*

- c. God's graciousness: Why did Moses suffer? The Bible says that Moses shared the affliction of Christ. Moses' suffering began with the killing of an Egyptian and fleeing from Pharaoh. Moses spent his prime years in the wilderness from 40-80 because of that decision. Did Moses do it for the glory of God? Did he partly do it because he was ambitious and frustrated? Were there some mixed motives in Moses? Wasn't killing an Egyptian a murder?

*How gracious is God to say of Moses, 'By faith Moses...refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward.'* (Heb 11:24-26)

## 2. What Is the Purpose of the Suffering?

*'I am filling up in my body what is lacking in Christ's suffering for the sake of His body...'* (Col 1:24)

- a. Intimacy with Christ. *'...fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...'* (Phil 3:10)
- b. So that you might come into your inheritance by these trials. Every Christian is called to come into their inheritance in God. But not all will come into their inheritance. But when we do, we will receive a reward from God on the day of judgment. [Interchangeable terms: inheritance = reward = crowns] Those who don't come into their inheritance will be saved by the skin of their teeth as though escaping through the fire (1 Cor 3:14-15). One of the ways to come into our inheritance (spiritual maturity) is to accept the trials that come our way by faith. *'Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial, which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.'* (1 Pet 4:12-13)
- c. Two areas of inheritance. (1) External (Temporal) – God gave Job exactly double everything that was taken away from him after his suffering; (2) Internal (Eternal) – What will not be revealed in this life, but before the judgment seat of Christ for your eternal reward. The key is the 'Fear of God' & clear vision of the judgment seat of Christ. This happens as you walk in the light and learn to rejoice in your sufferings and live an obedient life. Don't only focus on your external/temporal inheritance (blessings) but be very concerned about your internal/eternal inheritance.
- d. Why should a person become a Christian? To be blessed and not suffer in this life? To be happy? The last 50 years of Christianity have produced so many backsliders. Why? The greatest saints of God suffered deeply. *'Yes, all who desire to live godly life will suffer persecution.'* (2 Tim 3:12) But none suffered meaninglessly.

What has Christianity done for Paul? 2 Cor 11:23-29 – abundant labours, imprisonment, countless beatings, 5 times he received 39 lashes from the Jews, 3 times beaten with rods, stoned, 3 times shipwrecked, dangers in the sea, on the roads, threats from the Jews and the Gentiles, many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness, etc.

Why should Paul be a Christian? Why should you be a Christian? Because the righteous judgment of God is coming down upon the whole world. Rom 1:16ff, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only power of God for salvation for all mankind. Note that Paul is writing from the prison in deep suffering and he is not complaining. He says, 'I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and filling up in my flesh what was lacking in Christ.' Paul is taking his suffering with both hands. He knows his suffering is not God punishing him, but inviting him to share in the sufferings of Christ. Later on, Paul talks about 'the thorn in the flesh' (fishhook). Paul does not tell us what the thorn was. It is an umbrella term that we all come under.

## 3. Privilege of Suffering

If you are truly a born-again child of God, it is only a matter of time before you will experience a certain amount of suffering that God has appointed you. Why? Because you are very special to God.

- a. God has determined that so much suffering has been allocated to the body of Christ, some reject it, but others will accept it without complaining. Suffering is like the spiritual credit & favour of God allocated to you. *If you suffer for Christ, '...blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.'* (1 Pet 4:14)

If you want more anointing, you need to accept the suffering with Christ which leads to greater anointing in your life. C.f. Acts 5:41 – ‘So they [Peter & John] departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.’ Just 2 months before, Peter denied Jesus three times, and he heard the rooster crow, and he’d wept his heart out. Peter had failed the Lord so miserably because he was so afraid to suffer with Jesus. Now he couldn’t believe God would allow them to suffer for Jesus so quickly and so openly! We all have let Jesus down. But they were chosen and counted worthy to suffer Jesus so quickly after they so utterly denied Him.

They grabbed their second chance with both hands. *When we are suffering for Christ, Jesus feels it personally. Jesus said to Paul, ‘Why are you persecuting Me?’* The angels are watching to see how they respond. In times of financial reversal, sickness, betrayal, and we cry out, ‘Why me God?’ God says, ‘Why not you?’ because one day we will all stand before the **judgment seat of Christ**. Who will come first on that day? Billy Graham? Luther? Calvin? ‘The higher the profile here the lower the profile in heaven. The lower the profile here the higher profile in heaven.’ People who will shine brightly in heaven are those whom you have unlikely have heard of and they have quietly suffered for Christ. (R.T. Kendall’s theory)

**b.** 2 Cor 5:10 – ‘*We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*’ It will be the scariest day of our life. It will be the day of ultimate reckoning and only one person’s opinion matters. Jesus’ opinion will be the final assessment of our life and nobody knows what He will say. There will be many surprises that day.

Who will go first? Billy Graham? Apostle Paul? A name will be called out. Jesus will say, ‘I saw your tears and I saw your pain, and how you did not deny my name, how you worshiped and praised God through your sufferings in life.’ You may not have had a high profile, but in heaven there will be a reversal. ‘Suffering in this life is part of preparation for eternity. Not the punishment from God.’ You can say, ‘I don’t understand it. I can’t see how this is good for me. But I will count it joy according to God’s word.’ *And one day you will thank God for the trials (Rom 8:28).* An elderly lady of about 90 said, ‘I have been serving the Lord for so long, I can hardly tell the difference between blessing and trial.’

**c.** Henry Morrison was a Baptist missionary in Africa who served for 40 years (1842-?). He has decided to come back to New York harbour and he sent three letters that he is coming home. As the ship was docking NY harbour the band was playing. He said to his wife, ‘They shouldn’t have done this.’ He was about to get off the ship first, but a policeman stopped him. ‘Stop sir.’ He put his bags down. It turns out on the same ship was Theodore Roosevelt who went to Africa for a hunting game for 3 weeks and the band was for him. He was the very last man to get off the ship. He put down the suitcases and there was not a soul who came for him. He walked 3 blocks to a shabby motel. He was so discouraged he threw himself to the bed and said, ‘Lord, Roosevelt went for a game hunt to Africa for 3 weeks, and they play a band for him. I suffered for 40 years for you in Africa, and I came home and there is nobody here.’ He heard the voice of the Lord clear as the bell, ‘But you are not home yet.’

Paul said, ‘I reckon the momentarily light afflictions in this life are not comparable to the eternal weight of glory to be revealed in heaven.’ It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Life’s trials will seem so small when we see His face. Amen.

#### **4. Thank You - Ray Boltz, 1995**

*One by one they came far as the eye could see.  
Each life somehow touched by your generosity.  
Little things that you had done, sacrifices made,  
Unnoticed on the earth in heaven, now proclaimed.*

*And I know up in heaven you're not supposed to cry  
But I am almost sure there were tears in your eyes.  
As Jesus took your hand and you stood before the Lord.  
He said, ‘My child, look around you. Great is your reward.’*

*Thank you for giving to the Lord. I am a life that was changed.  
Thank you for giving to the Lord. I am so glad you gave.*