
The Mystery of our Suffering

I. Christ's atonement is finished.

“When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished,’ and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit.” [John 19:30]

II. The Good News of suffering.

A. Jesus suffered.

B. Paul suffered.

1. Paul is in prison. Yet he is rejoicing.

“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...” [v 25]

C. We suffer.

We were made in God's image, and as part of the new creation we are made in Christ's image.

“For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” [1 Pet 2:21]

“And calling the crowd to Him with His disciples, He said to them, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.’ [Mark 8:34–35]

III. Suffering is not an accident.

A. Jesus' suffering is unique and categorically different.

“[Christ's suffering] is full and lacking in nothing — except one thing, a personal presentation by Christ Himself to the nations of the world and the people of your workplace...Christ suffered to accomplish salvation; we suffer to spread salvation. And our willingness to endure hardship for the good of others is a filling up of Christ's afflictions because it extends them to others and makes them visible.” (Piper, 1992)

B. Human suffering does not add to Jesus' propitiation on the cross.

“For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.” [Col. 1:19–20]

1. “The word ‘afflictions’ [Gr: *thlipsis*] is never, in fact, used of the cross.” (Wright, 89)

C. Suffering always comes with a choice.

1. Blame God.

“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” [Rom. 9:20]

2. Praise God.

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” [Rom. 8:18]

“For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith — that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” [Phil 3:8b–11]

D. Suffering is finite.

“The exalted Christ is in Heaven and before His return He suffers in His members, not least in the life of Paul himself. These afflictions have been limited by God; the quota will be complete when the end comes. All Christians take part in these sufferings; it is through them that we enter the kingdom of God. Suffering with Christ is essential if we are to be glorified with Him. (O'Brien, 1268)

E. Suffering furthers the Kingdom.

“...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.” [v 26–27]

1. Our suffering is not in vain.

“Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” [Rom. 5:3–5]

2. The mystery of the Messiah has been revealed. He is the Suffering Servant.

“What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is not that they are deficient in worth or merit, as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe. What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ's afflictions are not known in the world. They are still a mystery (hidden) to most peoples. And

God's intention is that the mystery be revealed, extended to all the Gentiles. So the afflictions are lacking in the sense that they are not seen and known among the nations. They must be carried by ministers of the Word. And those ministers of the Word fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by extending them to others." (Piper, 1992)

IV. The mystery in the now and not-yet.

"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. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. [v 28–2:3]

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." [Matt. 28:19–20]

A. Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

"It is God's secret plan, anticipated in visions and symbols by holy men of old, and now at last unveiled before all His people...God's secret plan is not, for Paul, a timetable of events, but a person." (Wright, 91)

V. Paul's words are for us too.

"I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ." [v. 4–5]

"It was essential to listen to Paul's warning in his own day: it is even more essential to heed it in our day when the arts of persuasion, and the means by which they can be exercised, are so highly developed. There is a fresh responsibility laid on Christians to examine all teaching for the truthfulness of its content rather than the attractiveness of its packaging." (Lucas, 84)

Our call: "Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong." [1 Cor 16:13]

References

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