

Filling Up Christ's Suffering

Let me share some prayers children prayed to God. / "Dear God, I bet it is very hard for you to love everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it." / "Dear God, maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own rooms. I know it works with my brother." / "Dear God, please send Denny Clark to a different camp this summer." / "Dear God, instead of letting people die and making new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?"

Children's prayers are naïve but perhaps / not so different than our own. Our prayers become more sophisticated as we grow older, but our concerns remain pretty much the same. And a frequent concern is how to avoid, get out of, or make sense of the suffering that comes our way. For some people, maybe many, that's a major reason for putting one's faith in God, to try and escape the suffering of the world. / But is escaping suffering the purpose of faith? What is the relationship between faith and suffering? Is faith a way out of the troubles of life or a way through them? When suffering and troubles come to us is it a sign of a lack of faith or a sign of growing faith? Does trouble mean God is mad at me, abandoned me or that somehow my faith is not as strong as it should be? These questions are as old as religion and as relevant as ever.

They were certainly questions the Colossian believers had and the first part of Paul's letter surely made their hearts jump as he began his letter with such powerful and hopeful statements. He tells the Colossians that they have been rescued from the dominion of darkness and translated into the Kingdom of the Son. And this Son who reigns over this kingdom is the image of the invisible God, creator and sustainer of all things. He is above all things and in every thing he has supremacy. With credentials like that one would think it was a no brainer to be a disciple of Christ, to place your life in his hands. Surely this is a person that is more than able to take care of you, protect you, give you a good life. Surely giving your life to Christ will take care of one's troubles and many who chose to follow Christ believed that was the case, and it was the case, but perhaps not quite as they expected. For Paul follows those hopeful words with some words that were more troubling beginning in verse 24. */ I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness* (Colossians 1:24-25).

/ In what sense does Paul fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions? What does this mean? How was the suffering of Christ lacking, insufficient, incomplete? It almost sounds blasphemous to say such a thing. How can there

be anything unfinished when Christ himself said, hanging on the cross, “It is finished!” In what sense can the suffering of Christ be incomplete, imperfect when the scriptures say Christ was made perfect, made complete through his suffering? This is a curious statement by Paul. Not surprisingly there has been much discussion about what Paul means by it.

Some have suggested Christ’s suffering was not sufficient for our salvation. We must suffer as well to fill up what is lacking. This thinking led to believers practicing harsh self denial and other forms of rigorous religious requirements. / This kind of thinking is behind the doctrine of Purgatory, a place where we go through whatever additional suffering that may be needed to get us ready for heaven. But this can hardly be what Paul means when he has just praised Christ, and particularly his sacrifice on the cross, for the reconciliation of heaven and earth and for making peace between God and man. Paul is making another point I think and a very important one, especially for believers who may be inclined to see Christianity as a ticket out of trouble. Paul is showing us an important relationship between faith and suffering.

Figuring out the relationship of faith and suffering is nothing new in the scriptures. / A recurring theme in the Old Testament is that faith and trouble are inseparable. Rather than a way out of our troubles, it almost seems to be a rule that the more faithful someone is the more fearful his troubles. / Faithful Job

endured unimaginable suffering. In the first two chapters of his story we learn all his livestock are stolen or killed, his servants are killed, his house collapses crushing all his children, and he is struck with an a painful disease that covers his body with open sores. The following chapters Job cries out in anguish trying to make sense of his suffering, demanding God answer his questions.

The words of the prophets are frequently born out of great suffering and sometimes overwhelming despair. / Hosea writes out of the anguish of a wife's repeated unfaithfulness. / Jonah is a prophet deeply troubled by God's unseemly graciousness toward the wicked Ninevites (think Isis). / Elijah has episodes of depression alongside dramatic displays of God's power and victory. Nowhere is the anguish of the prophets more graphically on display than in the sorrowful words and / lamentations of Jeremiah, called "the weeping prophet."

And then there is the / Psalms, the heartfelt expressions of faithful servants of God. Most are expressions of thanksgiving and praise, but not all. Many are the disturbing words of faithful believers trying to make sense of their suffering. / *God...why have you rejected me?* (Psalm 43). / *Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths... there is no foothold....* (Psalm 69). / *Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?... darkness is my closest friend.* (Psalm 88). / *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?* (Psalm 22).

These are not the words of faithless people, these are the cries of people with troubled faith. The Old Testament is not a manual on the power of positive thinking; it is a reliable reminder of how the faithful also struggle with trouble. / Biblical faith is not a miracle drug that immunizes us from suffering. It is not a spiritual narcotic that deadens our pain. / Faith is more like spiritual surgery cutting open our wounds, poking them, cleansing them and then putting us through the painful, rehabilitative therapy necessary for healing. A faithful physician does not allow a patient to lie peacefully in bed with pain-killer pumped into his veins. / He demands those still tender limbs to be stretched, exercised, and moved on down the road of recovery. Spiritual therapy is no different. Faith is not meant to remove our suffering, but to enable our suffering to renew us, re-center us on God, return us to God. C. S. Lewis wrote, / “God whispers in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pain.” In the Old Testament faith does not eliminate trouble, faith embraces trouble.

But not just in the Old Bible, this is the faith Jesus offers to us as well. He told his disciples, / *In this world you will have trouble* (John 16:33). Of course many problems we bring on ourselves. Others are caused by the misbehavior and foolishness of others. These are the kinds of troubles God must allow to preserve our free will. If God wants us to freely choose to be people of integrity and good character, he must allow us the same freedom not to be as well.

/ But there is another kind of trouble, a particular kind of suffering that comes to Christians, not because they are unfaithful, but because they are faithful. It comes because they are Christ-centred. This is what I think Paul is talking about when he says we fill up the suffering of Christ that is still lacking. In a very real sense, faith brings more suffering into our life, because if we are really / Christ-centered people we will suffer over the things Christ's suffered over. Christ-centered people will find themselves / weeping over the spiritual condition of their cities even as Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Christ-centered people will / enter the anguish and sorrow of those close to them even as Jesus entered into the sorrow of Mary and Martha grieving over the death of Lazarus. Christ-centered people will willingly and increasingly / identify with and have concern for those who have no friends, no clothes, no food, no shelter and every other deprivation that marginalizes people in society. Christ-centered people feel the tension in one's soul trying to / love and treat with respect people who would mistreat or even kill them. In short, if we are Christ-centered, we will, like Christ, not run from the troubles of the world. We will run to them giving our lives to the work of redeeming God's good out of this world's evil. We should be under no illusions about the Christ-centered life. It is not easy, anything but carefree. It is a life that will be filled up with suffering.

We would, of course, prefer it to be otherwise. That is why there are so many who preach a faith that promises success and happiness. The following book titles say it all: / *Faith that Will Work for You*, / *Answered Prayers Guaranteed!*, / *Godliness is Profitable*, / *God's Laws of Success*, / *Live Long Finish Strong*, *the Divine Secret to Living Healthy, Happy and Healed*. And my favorite worst title, / *How to Write Your Own Ticket With God*. You get the idea. The purpose of faith is to avoid trouble, be successful, find the good life.

But is that what faith is really about? / Is faith a ticket to the good life? I think Paul, Peter, James, Stephen, and Jesus would say it is, but they would have a very different definition of the “good life.” I believe they would remind us, faith is a ticket that guarantees we will have trouble in this life. Sound strange? It shouldn't. Jesus told his disciples, *In this world you will have trouble*. Paul adds to Jesus' words his own. *I rejoice in what I am suffering for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's affliction*.

If we want to be Christ-centered, we must be under no illusions that the path to peace, joy and happiness is eliminating the trouble and hardship of life. We certainly don't see that in the life of Christ. Christ's life was full of joy and no less full of sorrow. Sometimes I have wondered, / “How could Jesus ever be happy?” How could Jesus ever laugh and be light-hearted? How could he not be overcome with sorrow, knowing and sharing as he did the suffering and pain

of those around him? Knowing the consequences people's foolish, selfish choices would bring? But Jesus was happy. That's one of the reasons the Pharisees were upset with him. / *The Son of Man came eating and drinking and you say 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard.'* They thought Jesus was having too good a time. Jesus said, / *I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.* And yet this Jesus was also / Isaiah's "man of sorrows."

Sorrow did not take away his joy. The joy that filled his soul did not mean his soul was empty of troubles. The Christ-centered life is a life filled with both joy and suffering. Jesus once told his disciples, / "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Full Joy! We all certainly want that, don't we? But do you know when and where Jesus made that statement? He was in the upper room on the very night when he would later cry out in tears and sweat as blood, and say to his disciples, / *My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow even to the point of death* as he anticipated being betrayed, arrested, beaten, humiliated, denied, tried and crucified. But before he enters into that garden of sorrow and suffering, fully aware of what is coming, he says to his disciples, / *Do not let your hearts be troubled... My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives...In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 14:1, 27; 16:33).

Part of the world that Jesus has overcome is the selfishness in us that causes us to run away from problems--our problems, others' problems, the world's problems. Jesus did not run away from our problems; he ran to them. / We all remember that terrible day in New York City on September, 2001. We saw thousands of people running away from trouble. Who could blame them? But there were also a remarkable few running toward the trouble, not away from it. / The purpose and meaning of their lives was not to find a way to avoid disaster but to be the first to respond to it. "First responders" we call them. That's what Christ was and is; the First Responder to a world in great trouble. And that's what he calls his followers to do as well. A Christ-centered faith is a troubled faith. Christ-centered people are the kind of people who do not run from trouble, but who run to overcome trouble. Here is the reason for the joy Paul says comes from filling up Christ's suffering. Nothing shows love more than the willingness to suffer for someone. Jesus said, / *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.* This is what the Christ-centered life is all about, laying our life down for others even as Christ laid his life down for us. This is what is lacking in Christ's suffering, expressing sacrificial love to people today so they experience Christ in us laying his life down for them. It is one thing to say to people Christ loves you. It is quite another for Christ to love people through you. It is one thing to say to someone

Christ forgives you, it is quite another for someone to experience the mercy of Christ in your forgiveness of them. It is one thing to say to a person Christ died on the cross for you. It is quite another to pick up your own cross and lay your life down for another because Christ is in you.

Too often people see the Christian life as a way to escape Hell and go to Heaven. But Christ came here to do much more than that. He came here to change us, to transform us, to make us the kind of people who not only bring to people the good news of a heaven to come, but who are also willing to share the personal hell they are going through right now. That is what Christ did. And that is what Christ-centered people do. We suffer for the same reasons Christ suffered; we hurt for the same reasons Christ hurt; we weep for the same reasons Christ wept. In this room there are people who are suffering and that is as it should be for a room of Christ centered people should be a place that draws to it those who suffer. In this place there are many who are sharing the suffering of those who are hurting throughout our city and that is as it should be for a Christ centered people are drawn to people who are suffering. We come to this place because we are seeking a Christ-centered faith, not a faith that runs from trouble, but a faith that lays down its life for others a faith that seeks to fill up what is still lacking in Christ's suffering.