

MAKING THE CHRIST CONNECTIONS

IV. “Connected in Struggles”

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Colossians 1:24-2:5

Text: *This is the secret: Christ lives in you,
and this is your assurance that you will share his glory.* (1:27b, NLT)

INTRODUCTION

Martin and Gracia Burnham spent 17 years as missionaries in the jungles of the Philippines with New Tribes Missions. Martin was a pilot, delivering mail, supplies, transporting missionaries to remote locations and sometimes flying the sick or injured to where they could get medical attention. May 27, 2001, they were abducted by Abu Sayyaf, a terrorist group with links to Al Quida. For over a year, they lived with their captors in unspeakably bad conditions, constantly on the move through the unforgiving jungles—often deprived of basic needs, always chained to a tree at night, tortured by ferocious mosquitos. The ordeal ended in a botched rescue by the Philippine army in which Martin was killed and Gracia survived, though wounded. Gracia writes of their year as prisoners in her book, *In the Presence of My Enemies*. It is a very honest book in which she reveals many of their questions, doubts and struggles in going through that horrible experience. But in the midst of that time, Martin said to her:

I really don't know why this has happened to us. I've been thinking a lot lately about Psalm 100— what it says about serving the Lord with gladness. This may not seem much like serving the Lord, but that's what we're doing, you know? We may not leave this jungle alive, but we can leave this world serving the Lord 'with gladness;' we can 'come before his presence with singing' (Ps. 100:2).

And that is indeed what they did through those dark days. Sometimes Gracia said, to keep their spirits up and “serve the Lord with gladness,” she'd go through the alphabet trying to sing a song whose title began with each letter: “Abide with Me,” “Blessed Assurance,” “Calvary Covers it All,” etc.

When we think about such tragic happenings, we all wonder as Martin and Gracia did, about why such things happen. But mature believers aren't thrown by circumstances. Martin's comment to Gracia, “*This may not seem much like serving the Lord, but that's what we're doing, you know?*,” is full of spiritual wisdom. Flying supplies to missionaries in remote jungle locations and saving lives in medical evacuations we all understand as important service to the Lord. But, suffering as prisoners? Yes, that too is important service to the Lord at times.

That truth is affirmed in our Scripture this morning by the apostle Paul.

I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am completing what remains of Christ's sufferings for his body, the church. (Col 1:24) .

SUFFERING

As a pastor, in my observations of people, when suffering or adversity hits us it often has the effect of knocking us off course, or at least taking the wind out of our sails. We often question,

“What am I doing wrong?” It can cause us to call into question God’s love for us and cause our trust to falter. As a result, it can stop our spiritual momentum and whatever we’re doing in ministry– the outflow from our Christian lives. I know when I’ve been doing my best to be faithful, to serve the Lord and then encountered opposition or things have seemed to fall apart in my personal life, it causes me to want to back off. But in mature Christians I’ve seen almost a nonchalance about the circumstances that come their way. I’ve read that Gregory of Nicea once called St. Basil’s faith “ambidextrous” because he welcomed pleasures with the right hand and afflictions with the left, convinced that both would serve God’s design for him. These saints understood that we have no promise from God that if we do the right things our lives will be free from trouble. Through the good and through the bad, there was a steady march forward toward God’s call to them.

Let’s consider what Paul is telling us about suffering for the Christian. As I’ve mentioned before, this letter is written from Rome where Paul is in prison. But, Paul has had a lot of other suffering. Listen to the catalogue he gives in 2 Cor 11:23-29, responding to those who are trying to discredit his sincerity and ministry:

I have ... been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?

Yet, Paul says, “I am glad when I suffer for you in my body.” Remember, Paul has only an indirect connection with this church. He’s never met these people. He only knows about them because, during his three year ministry in Ephesus, a new convert, Epaphras, went to Colosse, 100 miles inland, and planted a new church. When Paul says he is suffering for them, he has the big picture in mind. He realizes we’re all connected in the body of Christ. So, when he suffers, it is not just for himself. It is for the sake of others, for their benefit and blessing. He understands that Jesus Christ is the head of the church, His body, and is in control. Whatever happens, the Lord of the church is able to make it fulfill His overall plan. Of course Paul didn’t understand how big God’s plan was. This book of Colossians, along with the three others he wrote during this time (Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon) have been used on a scale beyond what Paul imagined– blessing, encouraging, and instructing countless millions of believers throughout the last 2000 years. Would they have been written if Paul were not in prison?

What a different way to approach our sufferings. Rather than our whinny, “Why me, Why this?,” there is a robust rejoicing in what we’re going through because in some way unseen by us, it is serving God’s plan. Jesus promised, *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world* (Jn. 16:33). So, when problems come, don’t let them stop us. We need to keep

pushing on through them in response to God's call to us in Christ Jesus. We need to develop that ambidextrous faith of St. Basil, welcoming pleasures on the right hand and suffering on the left, knowing that both will serve God.

The last half of this verse on Paul's suffering is a bit confusing, *for I am completing what remains of Christ's sufferings for his body, the church.* (Col 1:22). This does not mean Christ's suffering was not complete or adequate for our salvation. In fact, the Greek word translated here "sufferings" or "afflictions" is never used in the New Testament of Christ's sacrificial sufferings. It seems likely, Paul is here referring to the fact that Christ suffers with us in our suffering. Remember Jesus' words to Paul on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4). Saul's persecution of Christians was felt and suffered by Christ. And in Phil. 3:10 Paul speaks of the "fellowship of Christ's sufferings."

ENERGIZED

As I've mentioned on other weeks, Paul is confronting some false teachings cropping up in the Colosse. The false teachers talked of sacred mysteries, inner secrets known to only an elite spiritual few. Paul uses their language of mystery and declares the secret is now revealed. *This is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share his glory* (1:27b). That statement is a powerful summary of what Christianity is all about. Christ came to us, died for us, rose again from the dead, all so we could have that personal relationship with Him. In the Holy Spirit, He comes to us when we receive Him as Lord and Savior and lives within us— His life, His DNA in our spirits reproducing His qualities in us. It is not by our effort, but by His power we live the Christian life. So, that's the message Paul proclaims so everyone can attain perfection, or maturity in Christ.

For verses 28-29, we're using the NIV translation since I think it more accurately captures the energy.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

Paul is using an athletic image when he speaks of "struggling." It is the word used in competing in a contest or games— giving it everything you've got. However, he doesn't imagine it's all up to him. He knows God's desire is to bring believers to maturity and God has called him to have a share in that work. Therefore, he can work hard without the stressful motivation of pride or fear. He is clear about the source. It is the energy of Christ in the Holy Spirit within that does it through Paul's body. "Everyone" is repeated three times in these two verses in the Greek— "admonishing everyone," "teaching everyone," and "present everyone perfect." Paul here is widely inclusive and optimistic. This maturity is not just for a few, but everyone.

The word "perfect" used here doesn't mean "flawless." It conveys more the idea of being all we're supposed to be for the level we're at. A 3rd grader may have a perfect score on a math test. That doesn't mean she has a perfect knowledge of all math, only that portion expected of her for that test. So, in the Christian life, a new believer can be perfect for his level of maturity. More is expected of someone who has been growing longer.

Paul begins the next chapter then, continuing this same theme of struggle,

I want you to know how much I have agonized for you and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other friends who have never known me personally (2:1).

I feel this certainly must be a reference to prayer. Paul is agonizing, struggling for them and their growth to maturity in intercessory prayer. He knows it is prayer, serious agonizing prayer, that changes hearts and lives. Only God can work from the inside out, changing a person's heart, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Prayer can unleash more of God's Spirit to transform a life. The real battles are fought on our knees. Prison cannot stop Paul's prayers. In fact, it most likely gives him more time to devote to prayer— and he chooses to use his time to battle in prayer for the churches.

I'm certainly not as familiar with agonizing prayer as I should be. "Agonizing in prayer" sounds pretty bad. Maybe you're thinking, "I hope that never happens to me." But my experience with this is just the opposite. It is wonderful and exciting, because you feel it is the Holy Spirit praying in and through you as Paul refers to in Romans 8:26. When that happens you know things are really connecting. Let me just describe one time I was agonizing in prayer to you to give you a feel for this and hopefully encourage you to engage in this kind of struggle. As I've mentioned at other times, the teen years with our son Kris were frightening to Polly and me— especially in the spiritual area. I had been involved for a number of years with a retreat movement called Adults and Teens Encounter Christ. When Kris was old enough to attend, I asked him if he'd be willing to go, and he said yes. The retreats were designed so that all during the retreat there was a prayer team hidden away, on site, in continuous prayer for the retreat participants— during all the talks, the discussions, the sharing, everything. While I was usually out front helping lead the retreat, for this one I asked to just be one of the prayer team participants, wanting to intercede especially for Kris. The retreat began Friday evening. Saturday morning, as we on the team began praying, I felt an intense desire to be in prayer for Kris. It was not my doing. The Holy Spirit moved me deeply and I began weeping and inwardly agonizing for His soul— that's the only way I can describe it. I was sitting on the floor in the corner and feeling rather foolish, hoping nobody would notice me and wonder what was wrong with me. There were probably 20 members of the prayer team in the room. I did manage tell the leader of the prayer team a little of what was going on and to just ignore me— I didn't want to take away from the other important prayer concerns. But for hours the burden was intense, and I knew I was to keep praying. It felt like things were somehow happening in the spirit realm which I can't really explain. I do not know to this day what exactly took place. I asked Kris about the retreat afterwards, and he said he thought it was an awesome experience— no elaboration. But then, from my sixteen-year-old son I was happy for that much. No, we didn't exactly see any remarkable transformation after the retreat. Yet, I know something important took place spiritually. And Polly and I are most grateful he and his family are following Christ today.

Are there those you know that need that kind of prayer? Offer yourself to the Lord as an intercessor. We don't generate this agonizing kind of prayer in ourselves. It is a work of the Holy Spirit. But we first need to be willing vessels and give time and place for such intercessions to take place. As we do that, I'm convinced we'll at times be energized by the Spirit in agonizing

prayer to participate in the birthing of God’s miracles in the hearts of people. There is nothing boring about that kind of prayer! While inwardly we may be agonizing, it is filled with purposefulness and the joy of knowing we are participating with Jesus in kingdom business.

ENCOURAGED AND UNITED

Paul says, *My goal is that they will be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love* (2:2). Remember, he is praying this for these two churches, Colosse and Laodicea. These are two important needs for any church. Is there anyone here who doesn’t need encouragement? And certainly there can never be too much love.

Let’s be committed encouragers, every one of us, as Heb. 10:25 admonishes. Most people you meet are struggling with far more issues than you know. They often feel discouraged, beat-down, hopeless. A smile, an uplifting word can often make a huge difference.

I like the image created by being *knit together by strong ties of love*. That means our lives get intertwined, bound together in the church with love. I came across a remarkable example of this.

Tom was a student at Princeton, and began attending a nearby Presbyterian church that prided itself in being an academic, intellectual church. He attended a family night supper and sat down next to a man and introduced himself, saying he was new there, and then asked him, “Have you been here long?”

“O yes,” the man said. “In fact I was here before this became such a scholarly church. Why I’m probably the only non-intellectual left. I haven’t understood a sermon for over 25 years.”

“Then why do you keep coming?” Tom asked.

“Because every Monday night a group of us get in the church van and drive over to the youth correctional center. Sometimes we play basketball, or play games. Usually we share a Bible story. But mostly we just get to know these kids and listen to them. I started going because Christians are supposed to do those kind of things. But now I could never stop. Sharing the love of God at that youth center has changed my life.”

But do you hear what he is also saying? His heart is knit together by strong ties of love to those men in the church engaged in this ministry. That is how it is meant to be in the church.

CONCLUSION

As the title of this sermon series affirms, this whole epistle is wonderfully Christ-centered. Paul affirms this again in vs. 3, *[In Christ] lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*. All we really need to know is Christ.

- § If we meet trouble, adversity, or suffering– it is for Christ, so we rejoice in His purposes that are beyond our comprehension.
- § Christ lives in us, empowering and enabling us to be all He calls us to be.

- § He empowers and intensifies our intercessory prayer so it breaks captives free and births the kingdom of God.
- § Christ forms us into a body of believers who are creative in encouraging one another and being knit together in love.