

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

COLOSSIANS 1:24-29

Since we all owe our salvation to the sufferings of Jesus and faithful people throughout the years, it would seem logical that we should also expect to suffer in order to bring the gospel to others.

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Great Expectations

Colossians 1:24-29

Over the 18 years I have been here, I have always tried to preach the truths of Christianity to you without trying to sugarcoat them. However, I think that in my evangelism techniques throughout the years, I may have not been exactly truthful in my presentation of the Gospel message. I didn't lie; I just didn't present the complete Gospel message. I don't think that I am alone. When we evangelize people, we tend to approach them with the message that Jesus exists to make us feel better and to help us through our problems in life. In some sense, that's true but it sends the wrong message about the nature of God and the nature of Christianity. What then happens is that Christians then come to believe that God exists for me and for my happiness. Church becomes a place for me to come and get what I desire. God becomes someone who is supposed to fulfill my desires and heal me from all my problems and sickness.

However, the truth is that God does not exist for us. We were created for Him. Remember Paul has already told the Colossians that everything that exists was created by, through, and for Jesus Christ. We become Christians because in our natural state we are enemies of God and headed for an eternity in hell. We surrender our lives to Christ in faith because He is the only way we can be right with God and rescued from the fires of hell. God is the King. We are to serve Him. Church is a place where we come to present ourselves before Him to hear Him speak to us, to repent of our sins, and to get our assignments. Church is not some self-help community center. It is to be a type of Army Headquarters where we receive our orders. It is a place where we are trained and prepared to live lives that please God.

Listen to what Jesus tells His disciples:

"¹⁸When the world hates you, remember it hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹The world would love you if you belonged to it, but you don't. I chose you to come out of the world, and so it hates you. ²⁰Do you remember what I told you? 'A servant is not greater than the master.' Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you. And if they had listened to me, they would listen to you" (John 15:18-20 / NLT)!

When was the last time you presented the Gospel to someone like that? I don't think that I have ever presented the Gospel like that. But the truth is that suffering is to be expected if we are going to follow Christ.

Now I'm not talking about suffering because we are sinful, or obnoxious, or stupid. I'm talking about the nature of growing in Christ involves suffering. Jesus put it like this:

"³⁴... If any of you wants to be my follower ... you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross, and follow me. ³⁵If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life" Mark 8:34-35 / NLT).

I know that we as a society don't tolerate suffering very well, but there will be situations in life that bring our suffering into perspective. A farmer was coming out of his field along the back roads of a remote area. Just as he pulled out on the road, a crazy driver came speeding over the hilltop, hit the farmer's rig, and knocked him silly. The farmer lay there pinned under his wagon ... his dog not far away in the ditch ... and his mule across the road in the other ditch.

About that time a car pulled up and the farmer thought, "Thank God, someone is going to help me."

When he saw that it was the sheriff, he was even more relieved. The sheriff looked over the situation at a glance. Seeing the mule had a broken leg and suffering, he pulled out his revolver

and shot it to end its misery. He walked across the road and saw the dog was just as bad off, so he shot him to end his misery.

Then he noticed the farmer pinned under the wagon. He walked over to the farmer and asked, "How you doin' old timer?"

"Never felt better!" replied the farmer.

As a culture, we are real whiners when facing setbacks, trials, and suffering. But if we adopt biblical expectations out of life, we will be able to put our suffering in perspective.

The main idea of this morning's text is this. **SINCE WE ALL OWE OUR SALVATION TO THE SUFFERINGS OF JESUS AND FAITHFUL PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, IT WOULD SEEM LOGICAL THAT WE SHOULD ALSO EXPECT TO SUFFER IN ORDER TO BRING THE GOSPEL TO OTHERS.** I know that I have talked about this concept a lot but it's something that I think we need to be reminded of constantly. We live in a culture where we have been trained to think that we are entitled to have all the things that we have. And because we think like this, we tend to take people and things for granted. We don't often think about what it took for us to receive the Gospel. In some circles in the United States, we remember the soldiers who gave their lives over the years so we could live in a free country. That's what we celebrate on Memorial Day.

Even though we Christians have a day called All Saints Day, we don't often spend time thinking about the sacrifice of Christians throughout the years that enables us to read and study the Bible. We don't often think of pastors and missionaries who have dedicated their lives so we could hear the Gospel message. We don't often think of the spouses and children who give up the husbands, wives, mothers and fathers to do the Lord's work. The interesting thing is that pastors and missionaries almost never think of themselves as suffering. In verse 23, Paul identified as a servant of the Gospel. And now comes the logical conclusion. Paul knew that his life was over the day Jesus met him on the road to Damascus. Listen to what Jesus said Paul's life would be like:

"¹⁵... Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel. ¹⁶And I will show him how much he must suffer for me" (Acts 9:15-16 / NLT).

I. A LABOR OF LOVE (VS 24-25)

If Suffering Is Our Expectation, We Will Be Able To Embrace It And Rejoice In It.

In verses 24-25 the Apostle informs the Colossians that they received the Gospel as a labor of love. In other words, as believers right theology will lead us to this thought. **IF SUFFERING IS OUR EXPECTATION, WE WILL BE ABLE TO EMBRACE IT AND REJOICE IN IT.**

A. JOY IN SUFFERING (24a)

The first half of verse 24 informs us that there is joy in suffering. Paul starts out this verse by saying that he rejoices in what was suffered for the Colossian church. The word for suffering here means to passionately suffer all kinds of misfortunes. Let's think for a moment about what kind of suffering was involved in bringing the Gospel message to the Colossians. First of all Jesus suffered and died a horrific death so that they could be forgiven of their sins and reconciled to God:

"¹⁴Many were amazed when they saw him—beaten and bloodied, so disfigured one would scarcely know he was a person. ⁵But he was wounded and crushed for our

sins. He was beaten that we might have peace. He was whipped, and we were healed! ⁶All of us have strayed away like sheep. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on him the guilt and sins of us all" (Isaiah 52:14 &53:5-6 / NLT).

There can be no suffering comparable to the suffering Jesus experienced. Since justice demands that each one of us spend an eternity in hell, then Jesus experienced an eternity in hell on each one of our behalves.

Next, Paul was preaching in Ephesus when Epaphras heard the Gospel. Listen to Paul's description of what he went through personally to preach the Gospel:

"²³... I have worked harder, been put in jail more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. ²⁴Five different times the Jews gave me thirty-nine lashes. ²⁵Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. ²⁶I have traveled many weary miles. I have faced danger from flooded rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the stormy seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be Christians but are not. ²⁷I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food. Often I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

²⁸Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of how the churches are getting along. ²⁹Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?" (II Corinthians 11:23-29 / NLT).

Paul and the other apostles gave up everything including their lives to bring the Good News to the world that God was offering salvation and a restored relationship with Him through Jesus Christ.

And then perhaps while in Ephesus, Epaphras heard the Gospel and risked ridicule and persecution by bringing this message back to his hometown Colosse. If we were Christians in Colosse, we would owe our salvation to the sufferings of Jesus, Paul, Epaphras, and all the Christians who sacrificially gave Paul money to travel. The reason Paul can rejoice in this suffering is that people were being saved. That's something we don't much think about. We need to think about the people who have suffered so that we could hear the Gospel, receive it, and be saved. Paul loved God and he loved people. Paul was driven by his love for God and considered a privilege to suffer for his Lord. Listen to how the Apostles felt after they had been arrested and beaten for preaching Christ:

"⁴¹The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus" (Acts 5:41 / NLT).

The early Christians expected to suffer for the Name of Jesus Christ. If we understood that suffering is part of the Christian life, would we still want to be Christian? The answer for the early church was absolutely yes.

B. THE NATURE OF SUFFERING (24b)

The second half of verse 24 describes the nature of suffering. I have to tell you up front that I don't have enough brainpower to understand all the nuances of this phrase. Over the centuries there have been several theories about this phrase. I will try to give you a couple of examples, and then give you my simple pea-brain explanation of what it means. All the views agree that the sufferings benefit the church in some way. We have already demonstrated that from the very beginning, people suffered to advance the Gospel and Jesus' suffering is the Gospel message. Throughout the centuries, people have been tortured, burned at the stake, killed, and jailed to advance the Gospel. That's a given. But what does Paul mean when he says, "I fill up in my

flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions?" The first question that is asked is, "Where is the lack: in Paul's flesh or in Christ's afflictions?" First of all, all would agree that that has nothing to do with salvation. In other words, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus are sufficient for our salvation. The Roman Catholic Church uses a passage like this to demonstrate the meritorious works of the saints. In other words, there is this reservoir of good where good works fill up an imaginary container. These meritorious good works affect the prayer petitions and answers to these petitions based on the good works of the saints. I don't have enough brainpower to even really understand that argument or to do justice to it. The second view is that in several letters Paul talks about identifying with the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. In other words, suffering is a way in which we identify with Christ. So Paul is saying that his bodily existence can never fully identify with Christ but suffering helps him to understand Christ more.

Another view is that this type of talk is eschatological. In other words, there is a pre-designated amount of total suffering that must be fulfilled before Jesus returns and destroys evil once for all. When God was explaining His timing to Abraham of turning over the Promised Land to His people He referred to it in these terms:

"¹⁶In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Genesis 15:16 / NIV). Literally it says that the sin of the Amorites is not yet full as if there was an imaginary bowl that contained sin. In Revelation the Apostle John records this:

"⁹And when the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of all who had been martyred for the word of God and for being faithful in their witness.

¹⁰They called loudly to the Lord and said, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge the people who belong to this world for what they have done to us? When will you avenge our blood against these people?" ¹¹Then a white robe was given to each of them. And they were told to rest a little longer until the full number of their brothers and sisters—their fellow servants of Jesus—had been martyred" (Revelation 6:9-11 / NLT).

So this view is saying that when there has been enough Christian suffering for the cause of Christ, that will trigger the second Coming of Christ.

I think there is a lot to be said for all these views. I am clearly not smart enough to do justice to all these views. However, I think there is a simple view that I would like to put forward. Paul is talking about the birth and nurture of this church in Colosse. It is a fact that Jesus is the Head of the Church. In other words, Jesus birthed the church by His death, resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus suffered and died to give birth to the church. This church in Colosse is part of the universal church of which Christ is the Head.

Now in order to have this church in Colosse, we have already demonstrated how people suffered to bring them the Gospel. Jesus now gives birth to local churches and saves sinners through individual Christians who are willing to sacrifice in order to spread the Gospel. Jesus suffered and died to give birth to the church. Now Jesus uses dedicated men and women to nurture this church and to add local churches to it. The point is that self-sacrifice is suffering but it is the nature in which the Gospel is spread.

C. PURPOSEFUL SUFFERING (25)

And verse 25 reminds us that purposeful suffering is always worth the price. I think that most pastors echo Paul's sentiment here. In verse 23 Paul referred to himself as a servant of the Gospel. Here in verse 25 he refers to himself as a servant of the church. Pastors must be careful to be a servant of both. It's easy to just get up and preach truth. But it has to be applied in love. On the other hand, people often want a pastor who just loves them and makes them feel good. But he or she must balance it with truth. Being a minister of the Gospel requires pastors to preach, teach, and speak the truths of Scripture. There can be no compromise. As a servant

of the church, he or she must apply these truths in love. Pastors must have thick skin and must expect suffering. **IF SUFFERING IS OUR EXPECTATION, WE WILL BE ABLE TO EMBRACE IT AND REJOICE IN IT.**

II. THE MYSTERY OF LOVE (VS 26-27)

Jesus Lives In His People.

Paul has described this incredible labor of love on the part of many individuals including our Lord and Savior Jesus on behalf of all of us who have received salvation through the Gospel. In verses 26-27 he describes the incredible mystery of this love. This is even more difficult to grasp.

JESUS LIVES IN HIS PEOPLE. We are not simply looking at God living above us in heaven. We are not even understanding the miracle of the incarnation being God living with us in the person of Jesus Christ. We are now talking about the God of the Universe living in us.

A. THE MYSTERY HIDDEN (26a)

Paul starts out by teaching the Colossians that this mystery had been hidden for many ages in the first half of verse 26. As we have said before, Paul is arguing against some of the mystery religions of the day. They predicated themselves on having access to secret knowledge. Once they went through the initiation rites, they were forced to take vows of silence and not reveal these secrets to the uninitiated.

Paul does not mean secret knowledge when he uses the word mystery here. Over the past year, I have been thinking and studying about how God unfolded His salvation promise throughout the entire Scriptures. I like the way the Roman Catholics affirm the mystery of faith: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again." That really does say it all for Christians. However, now that we know Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises, we can go back and see how they fit. However, for the Hebrews journeying through these times, they would not be able to figure out how and when God would save humankind. The entire historical nation of Israel is the prophetic plan of God's redemption plan. God unfolds the plan in the context of the historical nation of Israel and written down in His inspired word, the Bible.

For Christians, we kind of have a big picture of the Second Coming of Christ and the events that will surround it. However, God will unfold that plan in the context of the historical church and the nation of Israel. There is no special hidden knowledge. The message of Christ is for everyone to hear. There is nothing secret about Christianity. The Gospel message is for everyone to hear and to receive freely. We are sinners headed for hell. God provided a way for us to be right with Him. That is to place our faith in Jesus as both Savior and Lord of our lives.

B. THE MYSTERY REVEALED (26b)

In the second half of verse 26, we see the mystery revealed. Paul is going to repeat this several times. Basically the mystery is this. The original promise to Abraham over 2,000 years earlier was that God would make him a great nation, that God would richly bless this nation, and that all nations of the world would be blessed through this nation. Now the nation of Israel was blessed and produced Jesus, the Promised Messiah and Redeemer. Then Jesus threw the offer of salvation open to both Jews and all other nations on earth. Through Jesus, Who came from the nation of Israel, who was birthed by Abraham, all the nations of the world are blessed. That is the first part of the mystery. The second part of the mystery is this. Earlier in the letter, Paul said that Jesus is the creator and redeemer of humans and all of creation. In other words, Jesus was fully God and fully man. The fullness of God lived in Jesus. If that's not incredible enough, Paul goes on to say that the God of the universe takes up residence in us. In other passages,

Jesus was described as tabernacling among us as a way to describe His coming down from heaven, taking on human flesh, and living among us. And in other passages Paul talks about us as being the tabernacles in which Jesus now lives.

C. THE MYSTERY MADE REALITY (27)

This thought carries us forward to verse 27 where the mystery is revealed. From our studies through Exodus and Leviticus, I'm sure you recognize this word tabernacle. It is the word for tent. However, in a religious sense, The Tabernacle was the specific tent where God's Shekinah Glory lived. Only the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies and he was only allowed to enter once a year. Any infraction, no matter how small would result in the death of the High Priest. This Shekinah Glory was manifested in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. It was said that no one could look at the Glory of God and live. But now the salvation story moves to a level where this Shekinah Glory of God, Jesus, actually takes up residence in our lives, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Paul describes this incredible truth as God's glorious riches and our hope of Glory. In his letter to the Romans, Paul talks about this indwelling as the down payment of our ultimate salvation and perfection in heaven. The great truth that should motivate us to the pursuit of holy living is this. **JESUS LIVES IN HIS PEOPLE.**

III. A MISSION OF LOVE (VS 28-29)

We Are All Called To Grow In Christ And Help Others To Find And Grow In Christ.

And ultimately, God's mission, Jesus' mission, Paul's mission, and our mission is a mission of love as described in verses 28-29. The mission of love is this. **WE ARE ALL CALLED TO GROW IN CHRIST AND HELP OTHERS TO FIND AND GROW IN CHRIST.**

A. THE METHOD OF THE MISSION (28a)

In the first half of verse 28 the method of the mission is described. One of the reasons the church exists is to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel. God is offering salvation, reconciliation, and fellowship to all human beings. We receive all that by giving our lives to Jesus Christ in submission and humility. Look at the three things we are called to do. The first is to proclaim Jesus. We do this by words and by allowing God to manifest the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control in our lives. St. Francis used to say, "Preach the Gospel every day. Use words if you must." So living in a way that allows the love and truth of Jesus to flow from us is powerful preaching.

Secondly, we are to admonish one another. The Greek word is *noutheteo*. It carries the idea of counseling or even warning. I think it is very important for Christians to surround themselves with people who think differently than they do and are courageous enough to tell them the truth. I think that I have managed to stay out of trouble over the years because I always surround myself with strong personalities who think differently than I do and are courageous enough to challenge me and tell me when I'm doing something stupid. One of the reasons I fell in love with my wife and married her is because she is such a strong personality. If I'm doing or saying something stupid, she will tell me to sit down and shut up. All my other close friends are the same. It's important to submit to the counsel of good friends.

And then we are called upon to teach. Teaching assumes two things. First of all, in order to be an effective teacher, one must first be a good student. I'm coming to the end of my career as a pastor, and I still have trouble understanding how unteachable most western Christians are. I think that most Christians listen to sermons thinking about what they agree with and how it

applies to other people. I have found that when people say, "That was a good sermon pastor," what they really mean is that my sermon agreed with their theology. Most Christians have not changed their thinking or their theology in years. When I listen to a sermon, I ask God to reveal to me what's wrong in my thinking, in my behavior, and in my life. I ask Him to open my ears, my eyes, and my heart, so I can change whatever it is that He wants me to change.

That's all well and good that we proclaim Christ, counsel one another, and teach one another. However, it says here that it all must be done with all wisdom and the goal is to bring people to perfection. Again, Paul is arguing against both the Mystery religions and the Jewish legalists. The wisdom talked about here is God's revelation in the Bible and in the Person of Jesus. It is not secret wisdom nor is it a set of religious duties. Wisdom in the Bible is always taking Biblical truths and applying them to everyday situations.

B. THE PURPOSE OF THE MISSION (28b)

The second half of verse 28 lays out the purpose of the mission. The goal is to prepare ourselves to live in heaven with Jesus. We do this by allowing God to perfect us. And the goal of perfection is to become more Christ-like every day. In other words, we ought to be growing in our faith, our attitudes, and our behaviors daily. Remember, if we are not growing, we are dying. The pietists used to greet each other with, "How's your walk with the Lord?"

C. THE POWER BEHIND THE MISSION (29)

And in verse 29, the power behind the mission is revealed. The Greek is much more powerful in this verse. Here is how the verse reads literally; "I labor and I labor." The word labor here refers to exhausting, manual labor that leads to weariness. It's like working a week full of 16-hour-days. By the end, you just want to come home, plop down in the chair and fall asleep. It is with this kind of energy that Paul and others are working on behalf of the Colossians. I have quoted you this statistic over the years, "20% of the people in church do 80% of the work." I know pastors and leaders who dedicate their lives to making sure ministry is carried out in churches. It's always interesting to watch the 80% complain and find all sorts of excuses why they are not involved in ministry. But no matter what the circumstances are, godly people always find ways to serve. I have friends who served in ministry, without missing a beat, while facing deadly cancer, while not knowing if their children would live through the night, while facing all sorts of circumstantial difficulties. I'm always humbled by their dedication to God and to the church. How do they do it I wonder? The next phrase literally reads, "(God's) energy energizing in me." I used energy because the word used for work in Greek is *energia*. The church belongs to God. The Gospel comes from God. Salvation comes from God. Perfection and holiness come from God. Our lives are all about God. It is God's work we are invited to join. We are never to ask God to join our work. And it is to be God's energy that energizes us. You can always tell if people are authentically motivated by God. People who continually try to do ministry by their own power with their own agendas seem to always be angry, unhappy, and burned out. People that operate under the energy of God should be energized, happy, and content. Oh, to be sure, they will be tired. They will be exhausted. But it's that good kind of tired ... the kind of tired you feel after a good physical workout. It is a peaceful and joyful exhaustion. **WE ARE ALL CALLED TO GROW IN CHRIST AND HELP OTHERS TO FIND AND GROW IN CHRIST.**

IV. EPILOGUE

I like passages like this one because it really does give us a corrected view of what the Christian life is all about. **SINCE WE ALL OWE OUR SALVATION TO THE SUFFERINGS OF JESUS AND FAITHFUL PEOPLE THROUGHOUT THE YEARS, IT WOULD SEEM LOGICAL THAT WE SHOULD ALSO EXPECT TO SUFFER IN ORDER TO BRING THE GOSPEL TO OTHERS.**

I don't know where we ever got the idea that life as a Christian should be bump free. The truth is that life in Christ will be filled with a variety of experiences. Henri Nouwen said this:

"To be grateful for the good things that happen in our lives is easy, but to be grateful for all of our lives - the good as well as the bad, the moments of joy as well as the moments of sorrow, the successes as well as the failures, the rewards as well as the rejections - that requires hard spiritual work. Still, we are only truly grateful people when we can say thank you to all that has brought us to the present moment. As long as we keep dividing our lives between events and people we would like to remember and those we would rather forget, we cannot claim the fullness of our beings as a gift of God to be grateful for.

Let us not be afraid to look at everything that has brought us to where we are now and trust that we will soon see in it the guiding hand of a loving God."

Can we say that is our commitment to God, His people, and His church?