

“The Christian’s Ministry of Pain”

It is said that 318 church leaders gathered at the important early church council at Nicea in 325. And all but about 12 of these 318 walked into the council with either an eye missing, a leg injured or some other body part maimed due to persecution. These men considered devotion to Christ and His church to be worth the suffering.

Is this how we feel about the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Is it so precious to us that we would suffer like that to tell it to others? Far too often because we think so temporally, we try to do everything to avoid suffering for the Gospel. We try to avoid the pain of persecution. We’ve bought into the lie that pleasure comes through the absence of pain. But our text for this evening teaches the opposite. It teaches that pleasure comes through the presence of pain – painful suffering for Christ’s sake.

Please turn with me to Colossians 1:23b-2:5. We get ourselves back on track in our exposition through the epistle to the Colossians by giving our attention to Cols 1:24. Let’s recall the main theme of this epistle which is: Christ is supreme over all things therefore He is sufficient for the believer in all things.

We find ourselves in the portion of this letter in which the doctrine of Christ’s supremacy and sufficiency is declared (1:15-29). It will be defended in chapter 2. More specifically within this section, in vv 15-18, we learned a primitive hymn that pre-dated Paul. He borrowed it under the Spirit’s inspiration and included it in Colossians. Indeed, it’s a hymn dripping with Christology. It’s an ancient creed about Christ’s preeminence. It’s about the person of Christ. We see His unique relationships (v 15) to the Father; (v 16-17) to creation; and (v 18) to the new creation (the church).

In next unit, vv 19-23, Paul deals with the work of Christ (more particularly His work of reconciliation) which is a reflection of his person. We see a symmetry between the two paragraphs: His person and His work. Like v 15, v 19 has the Father in view: The Son’s reconciling work brings pleasure to the Father. Like vv 16-17, v 20 has the creation in view: The Son’s reconciling work brings peace to creation. And, like v 18, vv 21-23 has the New Creation in view: The Son’s reconciling work brings peace to the New Creation (which is the church). It is a reconciliation that eliminates the church’s past alienation, ensures future glorification and evidences in present preservation. It was teaching on the church’s perseverance that we ended on.

So, we left off with Paul’s teaching on the church and it is with the church that we continue. But, there is a transition that happens. Before, Paul was talking of God’s work in the Colossian church. But now, Paul is going to talk of God’s work through him as a minister to the church. We could broaden it out for us today and say God’s work in the church and His work through His ministers to the church. Take note of the transition to ministers at the end of v 23 where Paul testifies, “I Paul am made a minister.”

This transition seems strange to us. Right before this, Paul gave us a stunning glimpse of who Christ is and what He has done. Our souls are enthralled with Jesus and then Paul starts talking about himself and his ministry. On the surface, that’s a let down because it might seem that the focus is now off Christ and on Paul. Not so. The focus isn’t off Jesus Christ. Paul’s explaining his ministry to the Colossians as another way of elevating Jesus Christ. How so? By explaining his ministry, how the Colossians received the truth, Paul is enlarging their vision to see the bigness of being a part of the church. So, his talk of his ministry is not really about him. It’s about Jesus Christ who made him a minister to the church.

This point was critical for the Colossians to understand because the false teachers were trying to diminish Paul’s apostolic authority. If the Colossians don’t recognize Paul’s credibility and authority they are going to miss seeing Christ because the Gospel of Christ is undermined. Paul’s got to tell them, “Look. This message is not my opinion like the false teachers are claiming. No. It’s much bigger than that. It’s the good news of your reconciliation to God which I minister to you.”

So, in this new section of 1:24-2:5, Paul unpacks what it is to be a minister to the church. The word “minister” is the Greek word “*diakonos*” which means “one who serves.” We get our word “deacon” from this Greek word. Servant is the idea. One of the things we will say around here at our church is: “All members of the congregation are ministers, not just the pastors.” We are all to be servants. Paul is saying, “I am made a deacon, a servant of the Gospel to the Church.” This is a great section on ministry. Something every Christian (regardless of our various vocations) should be concerned about because we’re all to serve the church.

So, the basic idea of this section is the following: **Because of Christ’s reconciliation, Christians should minister to the church.**

Let’s read Colossians 1:23b-2:5.

Because of Christ’s reconciliation, Christians should minister to the church. Okay. That’s a good statement, but what does it mean? What does our ministry to the church involve? Broadly speaking, we see 3 main areas of ministry: v 24 - A Ministry of Pain; vv 25-29 - A Ministry of Preaching; and 2:1-5 - A Ministry of Prayer. Today, we will only consider the first of these 3 areas: **The Christian minister has a ministry of pain (1:24).** Paul writes at the end of v 23, “I Paul am made a minister; Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church.”

I want us to notice from our text 3 characteristics of a ministry of pain. A ministry of pain brings us joy, it is for other Christians, and it is related to Christ’s pain. First...

I. A Ministry of Pain brings us joy.

Paul says, “[I] now rejoice in my sufferings.” The “suffering” spoken of here is not a physical trial or self-induced suffering because of our own foolish actions or just difficult circumstances in our lives. It’s suffering for Christ’s sake. It’s suffering because we’ve taken a stand for Him.

The world hates God’s message of grace and those that deliver it. Thus, God’s ministers/messengers are persecuted by the world. “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim 3:12). Therefore, learning to rejoice in suffering is essential for God’s ministers. How do we do that? We’ve got to look beyond the temporal here and now. For it is only as we look up there where eternal bliss is, that down here the afflictions will seem light. 2 Cor 4:17: “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (ESV). Our troubles are preparing us for great reward. They are light and insignificant compared to the important and significant glory that we will enjoy for eternity.

It’s likely that false teachers in Colossae were ridiculing Paul to the Colossian Christians for him being a prisoner in Rome. Basically, they claimed that Paul was suffering because his ministry was flawed. “There is sin in his life and that’s why he suffers” would have been their argument. They’d say, “Don’t listen to him. If he was a holy man of God then he wouldn’t be suffering.”

Yet, biblically informed Christians are not surprised when persecution comes. It’s a part of the Christian life. 1 Pet 4:12-13: “Beloved do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (ESV). The Evil One and the world’s system intensely hate ministers of the gospel. Suffering is God’s will for ministers. Philippians 1:29: “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (ESV).

Furthermore, not only is suffering God’s will but it is often an evidence of God working to prepare us for glory and eternal rewards. 2 Thess 1:5: “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of

the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering.” (ESV). Rom 8:17-18: “If indeed we suffer with [Christ] in order that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” Suffering for Christ is the exact opposite of what the Gnostic heretics were claiming. Suffering is not an evidence of God’s displeasure, but of His pleasure in one of His children.

Additionally, God uses suffering as an instrument to comfort other Christians. 2 Cor 1:5-6: “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.” (ESV).

Paul also explains that suffering is an instrument to advance the Gospel. Speaking of his persecution Paul states, “I want you to know brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ” (Philp 1:12-13). Suffering for the Gospel’s sake isn’t a hindrance to the Gospel, it is a help. Suffering is the means to advance the Gospel in our own lives, to other Christians and the watching world at large. Suffering advances the Gospel in our lives because we’re drawn closer to Christ. Paul wrote, “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings.” Knowing Christ more personally and intimately comes through sharing in His sufferings. Also, the Gospel advances in us in that our sufferings bring a greater assurance that we belong to Christ. Jesus said, “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (Jh 15:18). Peter wrote, “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.” (1 Pet 4:14). In other words, suffering causes Christians to sense the sweet presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This reality gives us a greater assurance of salvation.

For all these reasons, Paul’s constant sufferings were not a source of shame for him, but joy. He believed in Christ’s supremacy over all things, including sufferings. He realized sufferings were a vehicle carrying him toward victory – a victory already won in Christ. He rejoices because like the early apostles he was “counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41). It’s a privilege to suffer for Christ. We should feel gyped in our Christian lives if we can’t suffer for Jesus Christ.

Paul knew his sufferings weren’t in his life because of sin in his life or deficiencies in his ministry. No. They were there because he was living for the right things (living for the hereafter). We all need to remember this in our families or work environments that may be hostile to us. The ridicule, the cold shoulders, and snide remarks are evidences that you are ministering the Gospel.

Paul wasn’t afraid of suffering. This comes with the territory. Or, to borrow Paul’s analogy given to Timothy: “Endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” (2 Tim 2:3). Paul’s whole Christian life and ministry was marked by ongoing hardships and suffering. In 2 Corinthians, as in our Colossians text, Paul is defending his apostleship in order to defend the Gospel message. 2 Corinthians 11:23-31, “²³ Are they (referring to false teachers) servants (same word as minister in Col 1:23) of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? ³⁰ ¶ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” Paul was a servant/a minister of the Gospel who suffered. And his sufferings were an evidence of him being a genuine servant of Christ.

Is that mark in our lives? Are our lives marked by some degree of persecution for the Gospel? Persecution is normal for the Christian. So, if it's not in our lives, we have to ask ourselves, "Why isn't it there?" "Is it because I'm apathetic? A coward? Too comfortable? Too enmeshed in the world? Too cool to let others know I'm a Chr?" If there is a lack of suffering for the Gospel in our lives its because we're living for this world and not the next one. Do you want to spend your life for what matters? Are you deeply concerned about the fame of God's name spreading – His glory manifested? Then you must suffer. This is God's way. Why? Because when you suffer like Christ something occurs that's beyond human explanation. Something utterly unusual. You don't grow depressed and gloomy. Instead, your joy grows. Not a fake, external, plastic kind of joy. But, deep down there is this inward, confident attitude regardless of life's circumstances that the Spirit cultivates in your heart when you are living a life according to and for the advance of the Gospel (Philp 1:27-30). Paul says, "Now, I rejoice in my sufferings." Only the eternal perspective can produce such joy.

Bearing our cross down the Calvary Road behind Christ isn't a joyless road. Painful yes. But, one full of pleasures. Pleasures that come from knowing Christ and following behind him. Full of pleasures, because as we share in Christ's sufferings we are offering the benefits of His sufferings to others. This is a choice we must make day in and day out. We must choose either the passing comforts of this world or the sufferings of ministry. We must choose either broken cisterns that hold no water or a spring whose waters never fail (Isa 58:11).

We loose our joy when we loose our humility. We loose our joy because we pridefully think we deserve better circumstances. We think we're too good for this to happen. But, look at Paul. Imprisoned and sing praise songs. What? Yea, because he realized he deserved far worse. His biggest problem of deserving condemnation was taken care of by Jesus. Paul understood that everything else is small potatoes comparatively. This is why our brothers and sisters thru the centuries could sing while burning at the stake. They considered it a privilege. I'm not trying to romanticize this, but can we pray, "God I would count it an honor to suffer and die for you." If we can't pray that it's because pride reigns in us. We feel that we only deserve good treatment. But more that Paul or other brethren down through the centuries, what about Jesus Christ? Did he deserve the terror of the cross? No. But He had joy in that suffering. Why? Because He chose that suffering so that through it He could create the Church, His bride. As Hebrews states, "For the joy...set before him [he] endured the cross" (12:2). He had joy because the prize is far greater than the pain. His pain demonstrated how much He treasured us His prize.

Now, we His bride suffer in order to minister the message of His suffering to the church and world. Mission leader Joseph Tson said, "Christ's cross was for propitiation; ours is for propagation." The Gospel always spreads through missionary hardships. Furthermore, the individual believer grows through personal suffering and that good inward work ends up overflowing to other Christians and thus the church is edified. This leads to our next point...

II. A Ministry of Pain is for other Christians.

Paul goes on to write, "[I] rejoice in my sufferings (for who?) for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for (who?) his body's sake, which is the church."

John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, was speaking specifically about pastors but listen to this quote with the ears that it's for you as well because again we're all ministers. He wrote, "God appoints his ministers to be sorely exercised, both from without and within; that they may sympathize with their flock, and know in their own hearts the deceitfulness of sin, the infirmities of the flesh, and the way in which the Lord supports and bears all who trust in him." Through suffering the minister of God benefits and everyone else does too. This is cause to rejoice.

I'll expand on this later, but let's understand, when Paul says "for you" and "for the church" the preposition "for" does not mean in "the place of", but rather "in the interest of." Paul's saying, "It is in your interest Colossians (as Gentiles) that I suffer as I do. I suffer for the sake of Gentiles." Christ's sufferings were for our sin. Paul's were for the spread of the Gospel.

Paul never directly had face-to-face contact with the Colossians. But, his preaching ministry in Ephesus influenced Epaphras who then brought it back home to Colosse. Paul's sufferings were for the Colossians, more broadly the Gentiles, and indeed the universal church - "the whole body." That means our brother Paul suffered for us. We, this evening, benefit from his sufferings. This very epistle that we are studying right now was born out of Paul's suffering (his imprisonment in Rome). The Colossians benefited and we do as well today.

Back in Col 1:18, Paul spoke of Christ as the head of the body, the church. Christ is the head over the body, which we who are united to Him are a part. Paul's sufferings were on behalf of the body of Christ, the church. So, this is teaching that Paul's ministry of the gospel taken to the world was within the framework of salvation for the elect. This point comes out clearly in 2 Tim 2:10 where Paul states: "I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." I've adopted this as my ministry verse and it would be a good one for you too. To endure all things in ministry for the sake of the elect out there that are yet to come to Christ, but will. And to endure all things in ministry for the sake of the elect that already are in Christ, that they will persevere until the end. This is ministry. Living for others. Enduring hardships and persecutions for others yet to be converted and for those converted that they might be nourished in Christ Jesus. Suffering for Christ's name can come in many forms and perhaps you are this evening in some way. I implore you saints of God, see the big picture. Sweetness will come from your suffering - for you, for us. God may grind your rose pedal with a stone of suffering, but realize it's so that a sweet aroma may waft from you.

III. A Ministry of Pain is related to Christ's pain.

Paul describes his suffering as "fill[ing] up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh." For clarity let me give you this translation: "In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

This phrase does not fall into the category of easy verses of the Bible to understand. So, before unpacking what it means, let's understand what it does not mean. We certainly know from the rest of Scripture that Paul's isn't saying that he made up for a lack in Christ's atoning sufferings. That would be an utter contradiction of everything Paul says in the New Testament and specifically in Colossians. In this epistle he strongly argues that Christ's atonement was completely sufficient. Like Col 2:13-14 which reads, "¹³ And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, ¹⁴ by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Paul didn't, and any suffering Christian doesn't, help make up for something lacking in Christ's atonement. Jesus cried out on Calvary's Cross, "It is finished." And that was and is the case. Nothing more needs to be added to his "once, for all sacrifice." All conservative scholars will agree on this point.

They also agree that the phrase certainly teaches that a very close relationship/identification develops between Christ and the Church through suffering. Paul's Damascus Road Conversion testifies to this truth. So close is Christ's identifying with His Bride and Body the Church that he says to Paul, then Saul the persecutor the church: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4) For the church to suffer is for Christ to suffer. He takes it that personal. Interestingly enough, after Jesus said to Paul "why do you persecute me?" goes on to say, speaking of Paul, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16). Paul would go from the persecutor to the persecuted. From inflicting pain on Christ by attacking His body to being in the body and thus bringing pleasure to Christ for suffering with Christ.

Dr. Helen Roseveare was a 20th century British medical missionary to Zaire, Africa. In 1964 a revolution overtook the country of Zaire. Helen and her co-laborers were taken and had to endure 5 ½ months worth of unimaginable cruelty, affliction and persecution. One day, Dr. Roseveare was at the brink of being executed. She was not killed, but did grow more ill. Being in this slough of despondency she started doubting God. She questioned Him. She wondered if He had forsaken her, a simple servant trying to do His will. Then, the Spirit of God overwhelmed her heart with His presence and re-assured her with this thought: "[Helen] twenty years ago you asked me for the privilege of being a missionary, the privilege of being identified with me. These are not your sufferings; they are my sufferings." This comforting thought

about her union with Jesus Christ pressed deep into her soul. She no longer doubted her Lord – that he was punishing her. But that he had granted her a great privilege – to suffer with Him and in this she could greatly rejoice. This is what Paul is conveying - the sublime joy of knowing you are one with Jesus Christ and knowing that your Savior is participating with you in your sufferings for His sake.

But, what of this idea that Paul “fills up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions?” What’s lacking? Let me give you a few interpretations: First, Roman Catholics take this verse to argue for purgatory, which is unbiblical. The argument goes that Christians have to suffer in purgatory because Christ’s suffering/atonement was not enough to purge us completely from our sins. So, Christians have to pick up the slack for the lack by suffering after their death. Or, super Christians (they call “saints”) pick up the slack for the rest of us average Christians. We have to draw upon their reservoir of merits since they say Jesus’ merits weren’t good enough. Christ’s atonement needed help – a sort of spiritual supplement. As if to say, Jesus paid for most of our sins but we or other Christians have to throw in the spare change to make up for the rest. This is heretical garbage. This goes against Paul’s whole argument against the false teachers in Colosseae. Doing good works to make up for Christ’s suffering or suffering to expiate our own sins would be to play right into the hands of the Gnostic heretics. No. Col 1:21 states: “We who were once alienated and enemies of God are now completely reconciled.” Paul and every other New Testament writer teaches Christ’s completed work need nothing else added to it. Like Hebrews 10:11-12: “¹¹And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” His was a once for all sacrifice. It’s also helpful to know that the word translated “afflictions” in Col 1:24 is never used in the New Testament of Christ’s redemptive sufferings on the Cross – never!

Another explanation about the “lacking in Christ’s afflictions” is typological. That is, Paul thought of his sufferings as being like the sufferings of Christ. Jesus’ sufferings were a type (prefiguring) what all Christians would suffer. So, Paul’s sufferings correspond to Jesus’. Christians follow after Christ and thus in his sufferings. Is this true? Absolutely and certainly that is alluded to. But, it still doesn’t address our question about the “lacking of Christ’s afflictions.”

A third possibility is the eschatological idea. Eschatology meaning “end times/last things.” The idea is that Christians will have to endure afflictions at the end of the age. The argument goes that there is a quota of messianic woes that are yet to be reached/filled up. Therefore, there is this lack which Paul is hoping to fill personally with his sufferings and along with all other Christians.

The context seems to suggest a combination of two views. Part of what Paul is saying seems to be that afflictions that Christians endure were intended for Christ. In other words, Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven and thus out of the reach of people who would still like to persecute Him. Who’s left then for haters of Jesus Christ to persecute? Christ’s enemies still have afflictions they want to inflict on Christ because they still hate Him. Who’s left to endure their hatred? Christ’s brethren left behind. It’s in this sense that Paul felt that he would fill up what lacked in Christ’s afflictions. Again, we’re speaking not in terms of salvation, but of service, of ministry. Paul seems to allude to this again in 2 Cor 1:5 where he wrote: “The sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance.” Jesus said, “You shall be hated by all men for my name’s sake” (Mk 13:13). And likewise, Paul says in Gal 6:17, “I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus.” This view suggests that the suffering of believers are a continuation of what Christ endured. And so in this service, not salvation, sense Christians complete Christ’s afflictions. And I think, both the Bible and church history testifies this is just a simple fact. In a ministerial sense, the afflictions of every believer supplement the afflictions of Christ. The old saying still holds true: “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” The Church of Jesus has been built these last 2,000 years, generation after generation, upon the repeated acts of self-denial and suffering. Christ’s personal sufferings have ended. But His sufferings continue in the sense that he suffers when His people suffer for Him. Just as a head feels the anguish of it’s body, so too Christ the head of the church feels the suffering through his body the church. It was after the ascension that Jesus said to Paul, “Why do you persecute me?” His union with His body continues to this day. And still says to persecutors “Why do you persecute me when you persecute my brethren?” So Paul is not saying that Christ is still lacking in His own sufferings. But rather, what is still lacking in Christ’s sufferings in Paul. Paul’s sufferings were filling up the quota of suffering but there was yet more for him to endure.

The other wrinkle to this seems to be Paul saying that his afflictions are used to extend to the people they are meant to save. Again, this doesn't mean completing Christ's afflictions as if to add to their worth. Christ's afflictions are not deficient in their worth. They are completely worthy, completely effectual to cover the sins of those who believe on Christ. What is lacking in Christ's afflictions is that they are not yet known and trusted in throughout the world. So, Christ's afflictions are "lacking" in the sense that they are not known and embraced among all nations. This is where Paul came in. This is where we and all believers come in. We must carry the afflictions of Christ as ministers of His Word. We complete ("fill up" what lacks of) Christ's afflictions by extending them to others. What lacks is not propitiation, but proclamation. Not salvation, but service. We must go to the nations and tell of Christ's afflictions for them. And when we do, we fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. In other words, we finish up what His afflictions were designed for – a preaching of them to all peoples who still are ignorant of their unsurpassed worth. Inherent in the afflictions of Christ is missions. His afflictions are designed to spread the fame of his name, His glory. How? Through our afflictions.

This is a tough phrase to unpack and I've maybe given too many details. But don't miss the big idea. We're called to willingly, joyfully endure afflictions for Christ's sake, for His Body the Church and for the World and for our personal conformity to His death. Suffering is what we've been called to. It is a privilege "to fill up Christ's afflictions." That's powerful. Paul said, "I bear the brand marks of Jesus on my body" (Gal 6:17). Maybe not physically on your body, but what are your brand marks of affliction for Christ? Are you willing to suffer for Christ in your family? When they beat you up with their words of persecution? What about with your neighbors? Do you mind being known as the Jesus freak or do you just want to blend in and have a comfortable Christianity? With other professing Christians, that probably not saved, are you willing to suffer their abuse that they might come to Christ? This is perhaps the most difficult persecution. Persecution from professing Christians. Unregenerates that try to convince you just to live the pathetic, comfortable American vision of Christianity. "You know, you don't want to be too radical for Christ" they imply. And sadly, perhaps some in our midst may convey this kind of mentality, in talk or at least in body language. They're living "The American Dream" but not giving much more than lip service to Jesus Christ. He's just a religious pacifier. Maybe, your brand marks of affliction are in the area of giving financially when it hurts and when others don't understand why you give. But you know why? For the glory of God's name to spread around the world and you count it a privilege to give and suffer. Maybe for our students, the brand marks Jesus calls you to are in your classroom. Being a voice for truth. Corporately church, are we willing to suffer for Christ? Are we willing to suffer not only in the world but also willing to be thought of as too extreme by other Christians and churches. Are we willing to be thought of as insignificant because by God's grace we will not hedge on the Gospel or use church marketing gimmickry or easy-believism to pack pews?

As Christian ministers do we have a ministry of pain to some degree? Because if we're not serious about this now in these very light areas of affliction, how can we stand in the day of great persecution?

The true story is told of a man named Joseph, of the Masai in Africa. One day Joseph was walking along an African road and someone shared the Gospel with him. He embraced it with his whole being and was radically transformed. He was filled with such joy that he wanted everyone to know about Jesus in his own village. Joseph went from hut to hut telling the story of the Cross, Jesus' suffering that brings salvation from sins' penalty. He was anticipating faces to light up and fully embrace this good news. But instead, to his sad surprise, his tribesmen were belligerent toward him and his message. The men of the tribe pinned him down to the ground while the women would beat him with barbed wire. They dragged his limp body into the bush and left him for dead. Amazingly, he remained alive, crawled to a waterhole, and after many days of passing in and out of consciousness, managed to get back up on his feet. He thought that he must have left something out of the gospel story he had told. So, he rehearsed it in his mind again and again and went right back to the same village with the gospel. Joseph hopped into the circle of huts and proclaimed, "Jesus died for you that you might have forgiveness." And again, they seized him, beat him, and re-opened his wounds that just started healing. They knocked him out cold and left him outside the village to die. Miraculously, Joseph survived and days later awoke in the wilderness, battered, bruised, and scarred. And yet, he was determined to go back to the village a third time. This time, they didn't even let him open his mouth before the flogging commenced. This time it would seem certain they would

finally murder him. And all the while his body was being ripped apart he preached of the glorious sufferings of Jesus to these people who were inflicting suffering on him. The very last thing he noticed before passing out from the terror were the tears of the women beating him. His suffering pierced their hearts. His love for their souls unconquerable. When he awoke this time, he did not find himself in the bush, but rather in his own bed. And around him stood those who had brutalized him. But now, they were trying desperately to nurse him back to health. Now all they wanted was for him to live so they could hear the story that he was willing to die for. In the end, the whole village came to Christ because one believer was willing to suffer for the gospel. (Adapted from John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad!* 95-96)

“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.”