

We Rejoice to Suffer for You

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the goal of presenting believers blameless before Christ, highlighting the role of suffering, toil, and ministry in embodying Christ's love and work for the church. It explores the mystery of Christ in believers as the hope of glory, urging listeners to remain steadfast in faith and avoid shifting hope onto worldly distractions. The speaker encourages pastors and elders to joyfully embody Christ's sufferings and toil for the church, ensuring that their ministry reflects the love and work of Jesus.

Scripture: Colossians 1:24, Colossians 1:27, 2 Timothy 4:10, Philippians 2:29, Galatians 2:20

Topics: "Blamelessness in Christ", "The Role of Suffering in Ministry"

Description

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Transcript

Let's pray. Father, I ask that you would grant me the same or at least some measure of the anointing that Paul had when he said, I've called to to make the Word of God plain. And I pray that this people would feel not only the affection that I have for them, but that they would feel themselves in my affection loved by Christ.

And I pray that in this transaction, in these next few minutes, all of us would be made more mature, more blameless, more holy, more ready to be presented like a bridegroom to her, or like a bride to her bridegroom at the last day. So get us ready, I pray, and keep us faithful, and use this message to that end, I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Pastor Kenny, last week, focused on 22 and 23, you're going to take your eyes up just before the text for today. Let me rehearse verse 22 with you. Christ has reconciled us in His body of flesh by His death in order to present, underline that word, to present us holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.

So the aim in the death of Jesus is that we would be brought holy, blameless, and someday be presented like a bride to the bridegroom before Jesus. No condemnation, in all purity, fullness of joy, pleasures forevermore. And then, Pastor Kenny dealt very sensitively last week with what he called the condition, in

verse 23.

In other words, this if clause in verse 23 means that there is a condition to be fulfilled by us if we are going to make it to that presentation. Let's read that. See there in 23, if, indeed, we continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel.

And Kenny emphasized that none of God's elect will fail to fulfill that condition. None. All the blood-bought people will continue in the faith, firm, steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel all the way to the end.

They will. And he gave us three reasons. We are kept by the power of God, 1 Peter 1 5. He who began a good work will bring it to completion at the day of Christ, Philippians 1 6. He who calls you his faithful, he'll do it.

You won't do it, he'll do it. He'll get you home, 1 Thessalonians 5 24. So there's three actors in verses 22 and 23, not just two.

There's Jesus acting decisively for reconciling, for sanctifying that we might be presented. There's us continuing in the faith, and there's God enabling us to continue in the faith. So three actors, one goal, namely to present the church, in this case the Colossians, in my case Bethlehem, to present the church to Christ, blameless, no condemnation on the last day.

Now, in verses 24 to 29, Paul says, there's one more actor, it's me. Paul, same goal, fourth actor, Paul. Drop down to verses 28 and 29.

Him, that is Christ, we proclaim. That is Timothy and me, and he's going to shift to I in verse 29. It means mainly, this is my work.

We proclaim, warning everyone, teaching everyone with all wisdom, and here's the purpose, that we may present, same word, English, Greek, same word as in verse 22. Present everyone, mature in Christ, for this I toil, struggling with all the energy that he powerfully works within me. So notice the word present in verse 28, and then notice it again in verse 22.

Verse 22, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Jesus. Now verse 28, Paul proclaims, he warns, he teaches, he toils, he struggles to present you mature to Christ, in Christ. So the goal has remained the same.

Last week text, this week's text, goal the same. Get Bethlehem home. When I came to this church in 1980 as a pastor, after a few months of preaching, someone came up to me and said, Pastor, when you going to preach a salvation sermon? And I said, that's all I do.

Every Sunday I'm trying to save the Saints and the lost. They're always here, thank God. I want to save the lost, and I want to save the Saints.

Paul said, my ministry is to minister to the elect that they might obtain salvation. Salvation happens every Sunday that you walk into this room. You are being saved by these songs.

It's you are. You're being saved by the Word of God breaking over you, sung, prayed, preached. Every time you're under the Word of God, you are being saved.

You are being helped to continue firm in the faith, steadfast, not shifting onto the world away from Jesus. And every one of you is prone to shift, shift off of Jesus. Every week you're prone to shift right off of Jesus onto the world.

And you show up here again, and you are laid hold of by God and kept and saved. So I always preach salvation sermons. It's all I do.

So last week's text and this week's text. The goal of the death of Jesus is to present us blameless to Christ. The goal of our continuing and persevering is to make it home and be blameless before Jesus.

The goal of God's faithfulness in and through his persevering, preserving work is to get us home to Jesus. Paul's proclamation here is warning, teaching, toiling, struggling, that he may present us mature to Christ. And my job, faithful to those four, is to do the same to get you home.

So the goal in verses 24 to 29, that's today's text, is the same as 22 to 23. Paul is laboring. He's laboring to present the Colossians, and I'm laboring to present Bethlehem.

Kenny will go on laboring, the elders labor here to present you before Christ and to prevent that you would make shipwreck of your faith. Verse 24, Paul's stressing his own action. This is what gripped me in this text this week.

I rejoice. Are you with me in verse 24? I rejoice in my sufferings. In my flesh, I fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Verse 25, I became a stewardship from God. It was given to me for you. Verse 28, we proclaim, we warn, we teach, we present.

Verse 29, I toil, I struggle. With all the energy, he mightily works in me. That's a lot of Paul.

Paul's joy, Paul's suffering, Paul's ministry, Paul's stewardship, Paul's proclaiming, Paul's warning, Paul's teaching, Paul's toiling, Paul's struggling. So I read that and I said, Paul, if your goal is to present this people, these Colossians, and you're telling my goal is to present this people to Christ, why are you talking about yourself so much? Why wouldn't all the focus be not on you, but on Christ? Why so much attention on your suffering, and your ministry, and your stewardship, and your toil, and your struggle? That was my question that drove this message. Now I think Paul is very sensitive to that question, and I think he has a wonderful answer.

It is a glorious answer that he has for the question, why am I talking about myself so much here? Just to show you that he's sensitive to it, this is Kenny's text, or whoever's preaching next Sunday. He's preaching next Sunday? No. Okay, whoever's preaching, listen up.

So the beginning of verse chapter 2, beginning of chapter 2, you can see how aware he is of this issue. For I want you to know how great is a struggle that I have for you. There's no accident here.

I'm all in to letting you know my struggle, my toil, my warning, my teaching, my wisdom. I won't go any further in chapter 2. Paul is very sensitive to this question. He knows exactly what he's doing and why.

Now the why question here is so wonderful to answer. I mean, Paul answers it. I'm gonna save it for the end, okay? So I'm just gonna put that aside for now.

Why are you talking this way? And put it aside and instead, for the time being, talk about, okay, if you're going to talk about yourself, how are you doing it? How are you doing it? How does it flow? What does it look like in the text? If you're going to talk about yourself, how are you doing it? And then we'll close with, why are you doing this? Because the answer to why is glorious. So let's start at verse 25. I'm skipping verse 24 because the deepest answer is in verse 24 to why.

We'll come back. Of which, verse 25, that is Christ's body, the church, of which I became a minister, a servant, according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you to make the Word of God fully known. Now the word stewardship there means either a household plan, *oikonomia*, household plan, or the administering of the household plan.

It could be used both ways. The plan of the household and how to run it, or the person put in charge and the task he's given to do that, the administering of the household plan. There is a householder, God.

He has a house, the world, the church, history of redemption. He means it to be handled and run a certain way. He's accomplishing salvation a certain way.

And Paul is saying, when I was converted on the Damascus Road and when the risen Christ called me into this process of salvation from eternity to eternity, he gave me a stewardship. He gave me a place in the household plan, and I've got a peculiar job as the apostle to the Gentiles. And I'm trying to do my job for the sake of Gentiles, particularly you Colossians.

He never even met the Colossians, but he knew a lot about the church. And this is going to be read in Laodicea as well. He'd never been there either, he says, later.

I want to give you a sense of the scope of this household plan. You can either go there, but maybe better just to listen. Ephesians 3, 8 to 10, because both Ephesians and Colossians, this household plan figures huge.

To me, Paul says in Ephesians 3, 8, to me grace was given to bring to light for everyone. What is the plan? That's the word, same word, that's translated stewardship here. That's the plan.

To me was given the task to bring to light what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things so that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This is a massive plan. From eternity to eternity, the plan stretches.

It embraces the entire universe. It embraces the demonic powers of heaven and hell. It puts the infinite wisdom of God on display for demons and everybody else, and Paul's saying right here in Colossians 1:25, I became a servant, a minister, in accord with that plan.

So he has a place, and it's for the sake of the Gentiles, the Colossians in this case, Bethlehem in my case. Let's read verse 25 again. I became a minister according to the stewardship, the household plan from God that was given to me for you to make the Word of God fully known.

So I exist for you in this plan. My job as an apostle to the Gentiles is to proclaim, to warn, to teach, to toil, to struggle, to suffer, so that I might present you to Christ mature. That's my calling, Paul says.

And then he lasers in, in verse 26, on the specific dimension of God's Word that he's charged to make known. Let's read verse 26. The mystery, hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

That's what Paul is supposed to make known fully for the Gentiles, Colossians, Bethlehem. Now you know, I think, that the word mystery in the New Testament does not mean something incomprehensible for human beings. We generally use the word that way.

That's not what it means. It means something hidden that's now revealed, and you can understand it once it's revealed. So he's revealing this mystery.

Now he tells us what it is. Verse 27. To them, that is the saints that he just referred to, Christians, believers.

To believers, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles, and you need to feel the the word Gentiles here meaning something like all those non-Jewish nations out there. Barbarians, Scythian, it's just all around the Roman Empire, just countless numbers of barbarians. And Paul is saying, my job is to talk to them and tell them the riches, and start over, I'm gonna lose my place otherwise.

To them, God chose to make known how great among the, all those non-Jewish peoples, are the riches of the glory of this mystery, and here it is, which is Christ the Jewish Messiah. Christos meaning anointed, Christ the Jewish Messiah in you, non-Jews, the hope of glory. Now the reason I give it that particular twist, Christ in you the hope of glory, meaning Messiah in catfish eating, uncircumcised, Sabbath ignoring, nations, Messiah in you, it's because that's mind-blowing to the Apostle Paul, and that's what he meant.

Let me read you Ephesians 3, 4 to 6, when you read this, this is Ephesians 3, 4, when you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, same idea as here in Colossians, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now. It was hinted at in the Old Testament. Yeah, you can find pointers to Gentiles being inhabited by Messiah.

You can, but it's not prevalent, which had not been made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to the holy Apostles and Prophets. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs with true Israel, members of the same body, partakers of the promise of Abraham in Christ through the gospel. That blew Paul's mind, and blew the Judaizers' minds, too, and created unbelievable conflict in the early church.

Divine Jewish Messiah indwelling non-Jewish Gentiles as the embodiment of the hope of glory, that is, the hope of the fulfillment of everything he ever promised Israel, his chosen people. Gentiles now are full fellow heirs of those promises. Christ in you, Messiah in you, the hope of glory.

But notice the way he says this. It's not just that there's this amazing future glory. I mean, that's good enough.

Christ in me now, the embodiment and the guarantee of future glory. We're gonna make it. Christ is in us.

But he says in verse 27, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are now the riches of the glory of this mystery. Right now, the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. So right now, riches of glory.

Drop your eyes down. Got to steal next, just another little word from next week's text. Look at chapter 2, verse 2, right in the middle of the verse.

The knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden right now in you all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In other words, when we have Christ, we're as rich as we can be. In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, which I suspect means not only lots of wisdom and lots of knowledge, but all the treasures that you can get with the best wisdom and all the treasures that you can get with the best knowledge.

You can't be any richer than Christ makes you rich. So there's future glory guaranteed, and there's a foretaste right now of that glory. And Paul says, my job is to make all of that plain and help the Colossians feel the wonder, help you feel the wonder of being included in the promises, in the glory that's coming.

So to that end, he proclaims, warns, I'm at verse 28, he proclaims, he warns, he teaches with all wisdom, he toils, he struggles, in order that to be used by God to present the church mature in Christ, to get us home mature. How do you fall short of that hope of glory? How do you fall short and fail? You should know the answer to that because you want to avoid that at all costs. So back at verse 23, if you don't shift from the hope of the gospel.

Now he's just called that in verse 27, the hope of glory. So the hope of the gospel means the hope that the gospel presents, and the hope of glory is the is the goal of the hope. That's what you're going to get, the hope of glory.

And the way people fall short is that they shift their hope off of that onto the world. This is terrifying. I've seen it happen too many times.

One of my least favorite verses is 2nd Timothy 4 10, Demas, in love with the present world, has deserted me. So Demas seemed to be real. He was a faithful servant, it seemed, with Paul, and he deserted Paul in love with this present age.

And that's how it happens. That's how you don't make it. So all week long, the world is doing like this.

It's better. It's better. These videos are better.

These movies are better. This advertising is better. This stuff is better.

This illicit sex is better. This alcohol is better. These drugs are better.

This family is better. Vacations are better. Job is better.

Better, better, better. The world is better. And you show up here once a week, and God saves you.

And I hope, if you're among the mature, that you're in this book every morning fighting for your life. I am. I'm 76, and I don't presume anything.

I fight for my life every day. When Paul said, I have fought the good fight, I have run the race, I have kept the face, he was old. He was almost ready to die.

And I don't think he meant, and I don't have to tomorrow. He closed by asking the question, why are you talking about yourself so much, Paul? Even when you're talking about the the glory and the mystery,

you're saying, it's my calling. I was called.

I was given this stewardship. Why are you talking like that? Your suffering, your ministry, your stewardship, your proclaiming, your warning, your teaching, your toil, your struggle. Why so much attention to your own suffering and toil? And I'll give you the answer, Paul's answer, and I'll show you two places where he gives the answer.

Okay, so I'm going to sum it up, and I'll point you to where he says it twice, and then I'm going to apply it to us, and we'll be done. Here's the answer. I speak of my sufferings for you, Colossians, verse 24.

I speak of my sufferings, I speak of my toil, verse 29, for you, because what you see in my suffering and my toil is not merely mine. If you have eyes to see, it's not merely mine. It's Christ's.

It's Christ's sufferings, and it's Christ's toil on your behalf. In other words, Colossians, or I think if Paul were here, he'd say Bethlehem. And I hope you love Paul.

I hope you don't have some kind of vague relationship to the Bible where writers like the Apostle Paul are unreal to you. Like, I love him. I love the Apostle Paul.

He is a very close friend of mine. I love him. He saves me.

Why wouldn't you love somebody who saves you? Day after day, week after week, decade after decade, I bless you. Apostle to the Gentile John Piper. So he's saying, I'm suffering for you, and I'm toiling, and I want you to see in my suffering for you, Bethlehem and Colossians, that my toil and my suffering are a flesh-and-blood, present embodiment of the invisible Christ suffering for you, and toiling for you, and loving you.

Where does he say that? Let's look at verse 24. Now, I rejoice in my sufferings for you, for your sake, and in my flesh, my suffering flesh, imprisoned, beaten with rods, five times thirty-nine lashes, danger on the roads. I mean, every day Paul was denying himself and enduring some kind of hardship.

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. Now, there's nothing lacking in the atoning merit of the afflictions of Jesus. Like, he didn't die like, ooh, 90% atoning effectiveness for your sin, you guys have to finish the rest.

So what does this mean? What does fill up what is lacking? Would you turn with me to Philippians chapter 2, so Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians. So just before this book, Philippians chapter 2, verse 29, I want to give you a parallel wording that explains what I think he means. So here's the background.

Epaphroditus was the emissary from Philippi to Rome, 800 miles by land and sea, along bandit infested roads, carrying a lot of money. That's risky business in the first century. That's Epaphroditus, he's coming to meet the needs of the Apostle Paul.

Here's what it says, 29 and 30 of Philippians 2, 229. So, receive him, he's sending him back now, he's sending Epaphroditus back, having done this wonderful work for Paul, receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to literally fill up what was lacking. It's the same wording, translated complete in the ESV, same word, fill up what is lacking in your service to me.

What does that mean? So the Philippians loved Paul, they really loved Paul, and they were 800 miles separated and they couldn't get at him in person to love him and serve him the way they wanted to. So they chose a person to represent them, cross, risking his life to go to Paul, carrying their money, their love to him, and there's Epaphroditus filling up what was lacking. And what was lacking was not love.

Paul said later, you had no opportunity. What's being filled up here is love and service embodied in flesh and blood, in a person risking his life to get that there. That's what's lacking.

That's what I think verse 24 means. I know that Christ loves you, he died for you, but that was years ago, and Christ is in heaven, and you can't see him, and he still loves you, he's still working for you, and in me, in my sufferings, in my toiling, Christ is loving you. Christ is suffering for you.

Christ is toiling for you. I want you Colossians to look at me, not for me. The second place he says it is in verse 29.

For this I toil to present you to Christ, for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. You think, dear Colossians, do you think that my toil for you and my struggle for you are merely mine? Don't you think, Colossians, Bethlehem? You think my toil and my struggle are merely mine? You think when I call attention to my toil and my struggle, this is an ego trip. So I'm making plain to you that when I toil and when I struggle, it is Christ who is mightily at work in me.

He's loving you in my toil. He's working for you in my toil. That's what he wants them to know.

Yes, I'm calling attention to my toil and my struggle and my suffering and my warnings and my teaching. Yes, I am, because I'm not me. I am crucified with Christ.

It is no longer I who live, it's Christ who lives me. In me, in the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God. When I love you, he's loving you.

When I preach to you, he's preaching to you. When I get my arms around you at your deathbed, he's getting your arms around you. He is at work in me.

That's my job. That's who I am. Knowing Pastor Kenny and the elders downtown, I know twelve of these fourteen men really well.

Two, I'd like to get to know better. I know these men. Now given what I know of Pastor Kenny, whom I've worked with for thirty years or so, I don't hesitate to make this application.

It goes like this. When they, Kenny, the other elders, when they preach to you, when they teach you, when they pray for you, when they lead you, when they toil and suffer for you, you'll be in love by Jesus. Don't miss it.

Don't miss it. The Bible is given to you to help you understand reality that you can't see. That's why it's in the book.

I love you, and therefore I've been praying, God, may, may those who can't feel distant, invisible love like Christ has for you, see my words and my affections for you be his. He did say that in Philippians 1.8, I yearn for you with the very affections of Christ. Isn't that amazing? My yearnings for you, my longings to be with you are the longings of Christ, Paul said.

So when you are preached to, taught, prayed over, led, suffered for by the pastors and elders, feel loved by Jesus, because you are being loved by Jesus. One more sentence, maybe two. Lest you think that a Christian hedonist pastor like me overlooked the third word of our text, in verse 24, now I rejoice in my sufferings.

Lest you think that I overlooked that word rejoice, which, I mean, I've preached on this text many times and focused on that word. I haven't even mentioned it yet. I'm done, except for this.

A word of exhortation to Pastor Kenny and to the to the elders and pastors. As you embody the sufferings and the toil of Jesus for this church, do it with joy, right? Otherwise you'll be of no advantage to us. As you suffer, as you toil, as you teach, as you warn, do it with joy.

Isn't anything greater, Kenny, than to be a spokesman for the mysteries of Christ. Let's pray. Oh Christ, I ask now that in this room you would be taking hold on people and holding on to them for yourself by this word, letting them know they're loved by Christ as I love them, as the elders love them, as they love each other.

May your way of managing this household plan succeed in giving perseverance to your people. And as we sing, Lord, I pray that this amazing song which gets right at the heart of Paul's answer in this text to why he spoke of himself would seal it for us. I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

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