

Colossians 1.24-2.5, Purpose In Our Struggles

When Paul speaks of struggles, he is referring to suffering, persecution, rejection, and even getting people to actually live out the gospel daily. But he was able to rejoice in his sufferings, because his sufferings had purpose.

We might not always know the purpose *for* our struggles, but we can always find purpose *in* our struggles.

1. Through his struggles Paul is united with Christ (1.24)

Paul has written about God, he has written about Jesus, and now he turns to himself and his ministry.

He opens this section by saying “Now.” It’s the same as ‘therefore.’ Therefore, because of who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish, here is who I am and what I am seeking to accomplish. Paul, in every way seeks to identify his life with that of Jesus.

- Galatians 2.20.
 - *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*
- Romans 8.16-17.
 - *The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*
- Philippians 3.10-11.
 - *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

It’s easy to think of our resurrected lives because Jesus was resurrected. But Paul says that we must also suffer, just as he suffered. Maybe not in the same ways, but we will suffer. We suffer because just as the world hated Jesus it will also hate us. We also suffer because this world is not our home and our spirits long for the completion of our salvation.

So here in our passage, Paul says that he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church.

Not that he is in some way completing or adding to what Jesus already accomplished on the cross. Paul has already made it clear that Jesus has redeemed us, reconciled us, and presents us holy and blameless.

Paul had a unique calling placed on him, as the apostle to the Gentiles. He had to go and do and even suffer much more than what God requires of most people. He even says in Acts 9.16, *The Lord said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.*

Paul is filling up, in his own body what is lacking—or what he has not endured—of Christ's afflictions. Because he seeks to identify with his savior in every possible aspect. And he is doing this for the sake of the church.

2. Through his struggles the church is strengthened (1.24b, 2.1)

Paul says, *"I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake."* And, he is *"filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body."*

And then notice 2.1, *"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face."*

Have you ever considered that Paul's efforts were for you? That the work Paul did in the Roman Empire, and his calling as the apostle to the Gentiles included you? We are Gentiles. Like the Coloissians, and Laodiceans, we have not seen Paul face to face.

Hudson Taylor, one of the most important missionaries in the history of the church, founded the China Inland Mission, which still exists today. He could speak a half dozen Chinese dialects. He inspired CT Studd, who took the gospel to China and then back to his homeland of Australia. He influenced what became the Student Volunteer Movement, which saw thousands of 20-somethings take the gospel around the world. He has influenced the likes of Amy Carmichael, Jim Elliot, Billy Graham, Louis Palau. He ended up spending a total of 51 years in China, and is actually buried there.

During those years, his first wife died at the age of 33. Four of his seven children died before the age of 10. When he was 42, he suffered a near fatal fall on a boat and spent several years back in England in order to recover. At the height of his ministry, the question could be asked "why"? But all Hudson Taylor did was for the sake of the

gospel going to the Chinese people. So he spent those injured years traveling England and America, raising support, and inspiring many others to go.

Through his struggles the church grew and was strengthened.

You and I will probably never have this sort of stage or status. But how can my struggles be used to strengthen the church, or even individuals? Did you know that Ms. Quinette and Ms. Paulette only became good friends after the deaths of their husbands? They shared in the sufferings of one another for the building up of one another.

Paul writes elsewhere that we share in Christ's sufferings. If that is the case, then the reverse could also be said. *Christ shares in our sufferings.* He is one who understands our weaknesses. And we should find hope and comfort in that.

3. Through his struggles the gospel is proclaimed (1.25-27)

Paul is presently suffering because he has been sharing the gospel.

And now that he is in prison, he has begun a letter writing campaign. And because he is in prison, other people are having to take his letters, be his representatives, and do much of the work he probably would have done on his own. This is pure speculation, but how much discipleship and leader multiplication took place because Paul was in jail?

Paul writes that this is the "stewardship from God, given to him for you (the church)."

Paul is struggling because the gospel is being proclaimed, and the gospel is being proclaimed because Paul is struggling. This is his task, his mission. And struggling and suffering is the reality of it.

And you could say, "but that doesn't seem fair. He tells people about Jesus and his reward is suffering?" But you would be looking at it all wrong. Paul considers all things as rubbish next to the possibility of knowing Jesus and the power of his resurrection. The spreading of the gospel and the salvation of the nations was worth anything.

Joni Erickson Tada became paralyzed at the age of 18. After spending several years in self-pity, God showed her that there was still purpose in her current situation. Why did it have to happen? Could be simply because we live in a world where bad things happen. But God has used her to spread the gospel through her ministry, Joni and Friends.

We might not always know the purpose for our struggles, but we can always find purpose in our struggles.

Look at verse 7: The mystery, which is salvation for the entire world through the Jewish messiah, Paul says is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Look back at verse 21....

We are dead in our sins. We are without hope. But God, in his great mercy, makes us alive with Jesus.

Over in 3.4, Paul says that “*When Christ who is your life appears, then you will appear with him in glory.*”

The hope of glory is salvation that leads to eternal life. We experience that life now as we are born again in the Spirit, and we will experience it fully when Jesus returns. We will appear with him in glory, in heaven, in the new creation.

4. His struggle is to make mature believers (1.28; 2.2-4)

Christ has presented us holy, blameless, and above reproach, but we must continue in the faith. We must grow in knowledge, in love, in faith, in christ-likeness.

This is the struggle of Paul and of every pastor and church leader.

We warn, or admonish, everyone. We teach everyone. So that we may present everyone mature or complete in Christ. Like a child who enters preK knowing little to nothing, but then grows and learns and matures, and one day graduates from high school, may we learn and grow and mature so that we will be ready when Jesus returns and we ‘graduate’ into his eternal glory. Some of us are stunted in our spiritual growth and have been held back in the second grade too many times.

If we would look to Christ and all we have in him. If we would trust him and his power at work in us. If we would live in confidence and not in fear—because no weapon

formed against us shall prosper, and if he is for us then who can be against us. If we would allow him to transform us instead of wanting things our way on our timeline.

Look at what Paul desires of them down in 2.2-4...

- Hearts encouraged — find joy in Christ and in one another
- Knit together in love — because of the joy we have in Christ and in one another we see each other as brothers and sisters in faith. This is not about me, but about us. We are knit together. We are joined together.
- And together we will reach all the riches of full assurance and understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ.

But notice, it starts with love. I can have all the knowledge in the universe. But without love, I am puffed up, arrogant, most likely divisive in the church. Paul says elsewhere that if I can speak in tongues, if I have prophetic powers, if I can move mountains, but I have not love, then I am nothing.

As I love Christ and his bride, the church, I grow in wisdom and knowledge; because "in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Maybe the church is losing today because we're too busy fighting amongst ourselves — who can be the loudest and the rightest. If we would understand that we are going to spend eternity with one another — if we have faith in Jesus — and we would see that these light and momentary afflictions are nothing compared to the eternal weight of glory that is waiting for us, then maybe we would have a more prophetic voice in our culture. Maybe we would see the great spiritual awakening that many of us prayed for this past Thursday on the National Day of Prayer. But it begins in our hearts. Not with us being proven right in the world, but with us being made right before God.

And look at Paul's warning in verse 24...

Heed Paul's warnings. Grow in love. Grow in wisdom and understanding. So that no one may delude you. Let us not be so arrogant as to think we know it all. Paul says here that it is with *plausible* — seemingly reasonable — *arguments*. Paul struggles because he knows the tricks of the enemy, to twist one word, to move the boundaries just an inch.

Ephesians 4.11-16,

- *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of*

God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

5. Jesus gives him the strength for the struggle (1.29)

Paul knows where his help comes from. Back in 1.11, Paul prayed that we would be *“strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might.”*

Paul wrote to the Corinthians that *“when I am weak, then I am strong.”* Because he knew that in his weakness the grace of God would strengthen him. That only when he was weak could the power of Christ work in him and through him.

I think that many times we fear struggles or hardships because we don't think we will survive.

I am thankful for modern medicine. But at the same time I believe it has made our bodies weak. We get a sniffle and we go get a shot. We get a headache and we immediately pop some aspirin or tylenol. Everything is sanitized and sterilized and our bodies have no immunities to fight anything because we avoid all forms of bacteria. Again, I'm thankful. But for the most part, God created our bodies to withstand. In the same way, we enjoy so much comfort in our physical lives that we have weakened spiritual immune systems. We don't think we can endure because we are not strong in ourselves. We don't think we can succeed or be bold witnesses. But he has given us a lifeline in Jesus so that we can withstand.

Let us trust the glorious might of God and the full energy of Christ that he powerfully works within us.

6. The struggle is worth it (2.5)

Even though Paul has never met the Colossians he is still struggling for them. He is struggling for all believers. His struggles are even felt today among us. I imagine if Paul were alive today he would rejoice in the continued results of his efforts. He would see that his struggles were worth it.

Just as he rejoiced in the struggles themselves because they were for the sake of the gospel, he also rejoiced in the fruit that his struggles produced.

While sitting in a concentration camp, Corrie Ten Boom and her sister rejoiced over the fleas that constantly attacked them. The struggle they faced resulted in them being able to share the gospel with the women in their building, because the guards refused to enter in. The fleas were worth it because the gospel is worth it.

Do we rejoice in our struggles through this virus? The fear of getting sick. The isolation. The lack of toilet paper.

I don't know the purpose *for* it, but I can find purpose *in* it.

- Our family has gotten to know more of our neighbors over the past month than we have in the past 3 years. We go to Moore Farms to get produce for everyone. Some of it we just give out. Some people make requests and pay us back for it. We have one neighbor who will haggle with us and most recently gave us a pan of pulled pork.
- We have met kids in our neighborhood that we didn't know existed because they are in school and busy doing other activities most days.
- The gospel has gone around the world more in the past month than ever before because so many preachers are suddenly online.
- Johnny Saylor has had to sit down and figure out some of his new audio/video equipment that he hadn't had a chance or reason to research until now.

Are our struggles worth it?

Yes. But we must understand that our struggles unite us with Christ. Can benefit other believers. Can benefit us. Can benefit the spreading of the gospel. And that our strength for the struggle comes from Jesus.

Do your struggles have purpose? Does your life have purpose? Do you have reason for getting up each morning?