

“Now 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,” Colossians 1:24 ESV

Throughout the New Testament, the apostles reminded believers to be joyful in all times. Paul included these reminders in many of his epistles, likely because he was so intimately acquainted with suffering. A good summary of the trials and tribulations that Paul endured in his ministry is outlined in 2 Corinthians 11, and it’s a doozy. Church tradition tells us Paul was eventually beheaded for his faith.

While Paul and many other Christians faced terrible persecution and trials for their faith, it is important to pay attention to the attitude they each had, and Paul exhibited it plainly right here: ***“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.”***

Paul was serious when he said he rejoiced in suffering. He and the other apostles recognized the value in suffering. In Romans 5:3-4 he wrote, ***“not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.”*** Likewise in Acts 5:41 we see how the apostles rejoiced after they were scolded and beaten by the Pharisees for preaching the gospel: ***“then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.”*** These men considered it a privilege to suffer for their Lord.

What is our attitude toward suffering? Do we exhibit joy when we are going through tough trials or persecuted for our faith? Or do we complain, fight, argue, and threaten to sue because our rights were violated? It’s a tough question we must honestly ask ourselves.

Paul continued with, ***“in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”*** At first glance this seems like a rather strange statement. Is Paul saying that what Jesus suffered on the cross wasn’t sufficient? Were Paul’s afflictions somehow adding to Christ’s atonement?

Not at all.

A better way to understand this is to see it from Paul’s perspective, in that he viewed his present suffering as still insufficient to make him like his Savior.

Paul understood, like the other apostles, that suffering for Christ’s sake allowed him to have a deeper relationship with Jesus. And this allowed him to be a more effective minister of the gospel – which he went on to explain in much more detail in the following verses.

In the same manner, we too should consider our trials and persecutions as a means to both glorify God and make us more like Christ. Jesus promised that we would suffer

persecution like He did (cf: John 15:18-21). Romans 8:29 states, ***“for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.”*** We ought to remember that, as Christians, we will face hard times and difficult situations that God will use to better conform us to the image of His Son, and to make the ministry He called us to more impactful.

This refining process can be unpleasant, but imagine the effect when people see us rejoicing in suffering. They may wonder where the source of our hope comes from, or why we are not worried, or why we seem at peace amid a terrible storm. The Spirit may even open an opportunity for us to share the gospel through it.

When we have the proper attitude in times of distress, not blaming God or telling everyone how bad life is, but instead living with an attitude of thanksgiving and joy, our witness and testimony will have greater influence on those around us. So, when these times come, and they will, let’s remember to rejoice knowing that God is at work to make us more like Jesus.

~Jeremy Preece