

IT COSTS TO REDEEM

"Whereof 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." Colossians 1:23-24.

This statement of Paul's brings to mind two incidents. The first one concerns the late Gipsy Smith, the famous and greatly loved evangelist. In the midst of a campaign he was conducting, a man invited him to preach. Knowing how full his schedule was and seeking to make this extra assignment appear as light as possible, the man said, "This will not be a large meeting, and you can give us something that won't take anything out of you." It was the wrong thing to say, as the man quickly realized when Gipsy replied, "Then, my brother, it's no use for me to come. A message that will not take anything out of me is not worth giving!"

How correct he was! There is no completely painless way to present the redeeming Saviour who once hung on that painful cross.

The other incident rises from the gallant life of Adoniram Judson, whose flaming spirit brought the light of Christ to darkened men in Burma when the gospel was virtually unknown there. Because of his preaching, he was imprisoned. It was a filthy den in which he lay, and he suffered terribly. After his release he appealed to the king of Burma for permission to go and preach in a certain city. The king refused, but in his refusal lay a shrewdness that no one should miss. He said, "I am willing for a dozen preachers to go to that city, but not you. Not with those hands! My people are not such fools as to take notice of your preaching, but they will take notice of those scarred hands."

To understand these two stories is to have the key to what Paul means in our text when he declares: "Whereof 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."

Paul had a twofold passion--for Christ and for His church. Paul's devotion to Christ cannot be separated from his devotion to His church, nor can his devotion to Christ's church be separated from his devotion to Christ.

When Paul first came to know Christ, he came to know Him identified with His church. Paul was persecuting the church, and Christ said to him: "Why persecutest thou me?" From the time of his conversion Paul never thought of Christ apart from His church. Paul's love for Christ was a passion. It was a passion not apart from but identified with scriptural doctrine and church devotion.

The church is Christ's body in and through which He works in the world, in which He is manifested among the Gentiles, in which He is set forth as the hope of glory. The church calls for the ministerial sufferings of all believers in Christ.

The word of the text translated "afflictions" does not mean Christ's "vicarious sufferings" which He endured for sinners, but Christ's "ministerial sufferings" connected with the promotion of Christ's work. There were sufferings of Christ in which He alone could participate. We sing truly "Jesus Paid It All." The ministry of atonement is perfected. There is no outstanding debt. In the one commanding sacrifice for human sin Calvary leaves nothing for you and me to do. In the bundle of the Saviour's sufferings every needful pang was borne.

"Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon with His blood:
Hallelujah! what a Saviour!"

I cannot add anything to that. There is nothing lacking. His sacrifice was all-sufficient. And yet, "I fill up that which is behind of the sufferings of Christ." There are afflictions of Christ in which His people can participate. The sufferings need a herald. A story needs a teller. A gospel requires an evangelist. A finished case demands efficient presentation.

The church is the place of participation in these ministerial sufferings of Christ. Paul saw Christ not only as the Saviour suffering for sinners, but as the Christ suffering for His Body, the Church. Paul could not take his place with Christ on the cross to suffer for sinners, but he could take his place with Christ in the church to promote the truth of a Saviour who had paid it all on the cross and who alone could save sinners. The church's place is a place of suffering for the promotion of the truth of the gospel and the service of Christ.

Paul recognized the privilege to fill up the church's ministry. The church's promotion of truth called for somebody to suffer to carry on God's work with men. Christ built His church and suffered for it in His earthly life. That suffering should be continued by every Christian in his day and in the church.

The Christian cannot suffer as a sin bearer. Only Christ can suffer as sin bearer. The Christian can suffer in his flesh for the church's promotion of truth, and he can suffer thus only when he is in the flesh. There will be no chance to do so when the flesh is put away. What we pay we must pay in the flesh. Paul knew this and so ought we.

Christ built His church and suffered for it in His body of flesh till He went away in body thereafter to work in the bodies of His believers through His churches. The Christian is called to suffer in his body of flesh for Christ's Body or the Church. Paul carried on for Christ in the Christian's place of carrying on, namely, in the Church which is the Body of Christ. Our text calls on us to exalt Christ and His church and His truth whatever may be our price to pay.

Here, then, is an important principle. The gospel of a broken heart demands the ministry of bleeding hearts. As soon as we cease to bleed, we cease to bless.

Let us put it this way: what Christ did in His redeeming death for us was finally and forever sufficient, but the spirit in which He did it is something that must be constantly communicated to those who would bear its message to others. All ministry for the Master must be possessed by His sacrificial spirit.

The sufferings of Christ are seen in three realms:

I. Sympathy.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that since "For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted; he is able to succour them that are tempted." Hebrews 2:18. Let us not put too narrow limits on this word "sympathy." Let us not think of it only as a sentiment we try to express at the time of a funeral. It is much too big and beautiful a word to be left on the counter where cards of condolence can be bought for a dime. Literally, the word means "to feel with." It stands for that wonderful gift which makes any personality the richer--the ability to put yourself in the place of someone else. Think of sympathy as the capacity to put yourself, under the bonds of Christ, in another person's place. It hurts, but there is no redeeming men without it.

II. Supplication.

Our Lord's prayer life was frequently touched with pain. I do not know of a clearer description of it than we have in Hebrews 5:7, "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared." You can be very sure that the Lord Jesus did not always pray like that. Many times He prayed and His quiet communion with the Father had nothing of agony in it, only serenity. We need this quiet and quieting side of prayer. But do you never get disturbed over the fact that this is the only side of prayer that seems to be emphasized today?

There is a phase of prayer which gives you not a peaceful mind, but a disturbed mind. It is not the dropping of a blessing, but the generation of a burden. By prayer you can enter into combat with the powers of Satan. You take upon you the tragedy of other lives enslaved and broken by sin. You enter into partnership with the praying Saviour in rebuking and binding the demonic and deadly forces that are destroying men and women in the community of which we are a part. You ask God to help you be the instrument of His love to set them free, to win them to new life in Christ Jesus, to rescue them from the thralldom of this world and the bondage of Satan.

What a superb example Paul sets for us in this epistle from which our text is taken! In chapter one he said, "We do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will" (v. 9). At the beginning of chapter two he opens his heart wider and tells them how ardently he prays for them: "I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you." One version puts it this way, "I would have you know how greatly I agonize for you."

Most of us are far removed from that sort of prayer. The master word in modern church life is "organize." "Agonize" is a word taken from a foreign tongue so far as most of us are concerned. The winner of souls must at times feel the woe of sin or his prayers will be powerless and useless. Christian, ask yourself this question, Has there been any pain in my prayers for others lately? Have I really tasted the fellowship of my Lord's suffering in supplication? Have I done any filling up of that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ?

III. Service.

Christ did not stop with sympathy, however genuine and heart-felt it was. He laid Himself out to do something for them. He acted to meet their need. He ministered to their necessities. "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people." Matthew 9:35.

Was that easy? Was it all "sweetness and light"? Did it make no expensive draft on His mental powers, His physical energies, His spiritual sensitiveness? When one woman "touched" Him one day, He said, "Virtue (strength) is gone out of me."

Let me mention two aspects of our service which are related to the sufferings of Christ:

1. We are always in danger of forgetting that the smaller ministries of love are as much an acceptable sacrifice as the dramatic and talked-about deeds of others. Too many of us are ready to pay glowing tribute to the men and women who were burned at the stake for Christ's sake, while we will not even teach a Sunday School class because it would require an earlier getting-up time on Sunday morning. We need people who will do small things, and dull things, but with a large heart and for a great purpose.
2. There is nothing that will keep us forever at the job in the service of Christ and His church like the fire of love and self-giving that is kindled in our hearts through the cross of the Saviour.

We think of George Whitefield, who crossed the Atlantic Ocean thirteen times in the eighteenth century when crossings were long and hazardous, all to preach Christ and Him crucified. On September 29, 1770 he preached what appeared to be his last sermon and started back to Boston, Massachusetts. So ill and exhausted was he that a friend said to him: "You are more fit to go to bed than to preach."

"True," replied Whitefield, and then, clasping his hands and looking heavenward, he added, "Lord Jesus, I am weary in Thy work, but not of it. If I have not finished my course, let me go and speak for Thee once more in the fields, seal Thy truth, and come home and die!"

Whereupon the great preacher mounted a hogshead. A crowd quickly assembled. He gave out his text, "Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith." Describing the scene, a listener wrote that Whitefield "remained several minutes unable to speak." When he did gather strength to speak, the old fire flamed up. In the sermon he cried: "I go to rest prepared; my sun has arisen and, by aid from heaven, has given light to many. It is now about to set--no, it is about to rise to the zenith of immortal glory....O thought divine! I soon shall be in a world where pain, age, time and sorrow are unknown. My body fails, my spirit expands. How willingly would I live forever to preach Christ! But I die to be with Him!"

Yes, it costs to redeem! It costs in sympathy, in supplication, and in service. If you are a faithful witness for Christ, you will have the satisfaction of knowing you helped to "fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ."