

**First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN**

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**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

What a joy, to sing all these Christmas Carols with you on Christmas Day! What a joy it must have been for Mary to hold Jesus in her arms, and what a joy it must have been for the shepherds to find Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus! The Savior of the world has come, of the Father's love begotten! The Son of God has taken on flesh and become a man to redeem his people Israel and to save us from our sins!

But in the midst of this joy there is also wonder – wonder not only that the Son of God has become a man, but wonder that he has done it in this way. Before he can even walk, before he has even spoken a word, already he has plunged himself into a life of suffering. God could have chosen any woman in the world to give birth to the baby Jesus. He could have chosen a rich woman to give birth to baby Jesus surrounded by servants, a rich woman who would have laid him in a soft cradle lined with purple, a rich woman who would have fed him with a silver spoon and who would have provided him with everything a boy could ever desire. For that matter, God could have made the history of the world altogether different so that Jesus would come into the world the son of a powerful ruler. But no, God chose Mary.

God chose a poor young woman among an oppressed people, a powerless woman who didn't even have a choice in where to give birth to baby Jesus. The whole reason Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem is because they and all their fellow Jews are under the cruel thumb of the Roman Emperor – Caesar Augustus ordered a census, and so Mary made the terribly difficult journey to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem. And the whole reason Jesus has been born in a barn and laid in a stone feeding-trough is because Mary and Joseph are nobodies, poor and powerless – they are as homeless in that town as two people today who find shelter in a cardboard box.

Everybody there in that stable saw all this. They knew what it meant. They woke up in the morning and went to sleep at night constantly aware of the presence of their Roman oppressors. And they also knew where they fit in the order of Jewish society – the upper classes of the Pharisees and Sadducees were far above them, while they were nothing but peasants to be passed in the street without so much as a nod. This was how the Son of God was born into this world.

His life would be a hard one. While still a toddler, he would be hunted like a dog by Herod – he would flee with Joseph and his mother to Egypt as Herod systematically murdered every boy in Judea two years old or under. When Jesus returned to the land, he would grow up in the shadow of those same Roman oppressors and the powerful, corrupt Jews who turned the worship of God in Jerusalem into a scandalous, money-making enterprise. He would grow up to be a construction worker in Nazareth, no doubt laboring day after day in the nearby Roman city of Sepphoris. And one day, when he announced himself to the world, he would face much greater suffering.

For forty days he would be tempted by the devil in the wilderness. For three-and-a-half years he would be homeless as he went about preaching, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”

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(Mat 4:17). He would become a hunted man, hated by those who wanted to kill him. And then the day would come when he would be betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested, beaten, and spit upon. He would be flogged, he would be tortured with a crown of thorns, and he would be nailed to a cross where he would slowly die an agonizing death of suffocation – and where he would be crushed by the wrath of his Almighty Father as he who knew no sin became sin for us, that we in him might become the righteousness of God.

So as we marvel at the birth of Jesus, let us stop and think hard about how we ought to live our lives in a way that is worthy of this meek, suffering savior. That is what we have been learning from Paul's letter to the Philippians – and as we pick up where we left off last Sunday, we find a perfect Christmas sermon waiting for us in 1:29-30.

Christians who give gifts to one another at Christmastime usually think of those gifts as symbolic – they symbolize the great gift that God gave us the day baby Jesus was laid in the manger. But here in Philippians 1:29-30, we see two other gifts that God has also given us. These are gifts that we ought to accept with joy and with gratitude. We cannot celebrate the gift of baby Jesus unless we also celebrate these gifts, too:

Philippians 1:27-30 27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 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, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Paul's main point here in vv. 29-30 is that we who are Christians, we who believe in Jesus, have been given a gift from God to suffer for his sake in the defense of the gospel. Therefore, we ought to suffer well, in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ. That will be my challenge to you as you leave here today – stand up for Jesus, and rejoice when you suffer for it!

But this isn't easy to do, is it? It doesn't come naturally to us. No, what we naturally want is ease, comfort, wealth, and popularity – living for ourselves, safe and secure, while we play games and watch TV and, when we do talk to other people, looking for their acceptance and their approval. Paul is telling us to think and to feel in a whole different way – to stand united with other Christians in defense of the gospel, united against a world that hates us. Starting to live like this isn't as easy as flipping on a switch. You need to stop and ponder what Paul is saying here, stop and meditate upon what God has given you, if you are a Christian. That is what I want to do this morning.

So stop and think this morning – stop and think like Mary thought, as she lay there panting from the pain and the agony of giving birth to baby Jesus. She was chosen to suffer that pain for the sake of Christ, who would suffer even more for her own salvation. And if you are a Christian, you have been chosen to suffer for the sake of Christ, too. All of this is God's gift to you.

Stop and let this sink in until it fills you with all the wonder that Mary felt and that the apostle Paul felt and that the Philippian Christians felt. Stop and let this sink in until it leaves you eager, so eager that nothing else will satisfy you but to accept and enjoy *all* of God's gifts to you – including suffering for the sake of Christ!

In vv. 29-30, Paul is explaining what he meant at the end of v. 28. There at the end of v. 28 he said that if we stood united for the gospel, courageous in the face of our opponents, it would be “a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.” So now, in v. 29, he explains what he meant by that last part, that our salvation – and our salvation *in this way*, suffering in our defense of the gospel – is from God: “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.”

## **Exposition**

### **I. God’s Gift to Us Is to Believe in Christ**

Let’s stop to think about the first part of that – that it has been granted to us to believe in Jesus. Paul is talking to Christians, here – people who already believe in Jesus. He’s not writing this letter to unbelievers. And here, we see that the only reason they ever came to believe in Jesus is because God *gave* them that faith. Their belief in Jesus is God’s gracious gift to them.

This is why Paul said in v. 28 that their salvation is from God – because without faith in Jesus there can be no salvation: “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (Joh 3:18). The only way to be saved from the guilt of sin and the punishment of eternal torment in hell is to believe in Jesus, who died on the cross and bore the punishment for your sins. If you don’t believe in Jesus, then you will go to hell. But if you do believe in Jesus, if you do accept the salvation God offers in his Son, then you will be saved. That is God’s gift to all who believe.

But not only is salvation God’s gift to all who have faith in Jesus, our very faith in Jesus is God’s gift to us! That is what Paul is saying here in v. 29. Without this gift, nobody could ever believe. Not one of us could ever believe in Jesus on our own. Jesus told his disciples, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Joh 6:44a). Unless God reaches down and changes us, nobody could ever believe in Jesus – not even if we saw him perform miracles with our own eyes!

That’s what Jesus said, in Matthew 11. Just listen to the prayer Jesus prayed right after he rebuked the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for not believing in him after all the miracles he had performed in those cities:

Matthew 11:25-26 25 At that time Jesus declared, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”

And when Jesus explained a parable to the disciples in Matthew 13, he told them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Mat 13:11b). Knowing the truth and believing in Jesus is something we can have if and *only* if God *gives* it to us.

I think the Philippian Christians already understand this. I think the main reason Paul brings up simple faith here in v. 29 isn’t so much to remind the Philippians that their faith is a gift from God, but to point out to the Philippian Christians that faith isn’t the only

thing God has given them. But we ourselves *do* need to be reminded that our faith is a gift.

That is why I'm spending so much time on this – because as long as we think our faith in Jesus is something *we* have accomplished, our view of salvation will be out of focus, distorted, blurry – we will think of salvation as something God gave us in return for our faith.

Have you ever put on somebody else's glasses, and suddenly everything looked strange to you – blurry and out of focus? That's how salvation looks to us when we think it is God's reward for our good work of faith, and we don't even realize that our vision is clouded.

But as long as salvation is all blurry and fuzzy to us like this, we will have a hard time seeing clearly what Paul is saying here about the *other* gift that God gives us. After all, if we think of salvation as a *reward* that God gives us for being so good that we believe in Jesus, how could we imagine this other thing Paul talks about – suffering for the sake of Christ – as a gift that God gives to us?

Only when we understand that our very faith in Christ is a gift from God does everything snap into focus. Once we understand that we are Christians because God *chose* us, God *gave* us our faith, then we understand that we are but dust – and God is our sovereign King. We are his subjects, citizens of heaven, and it is utterly unthinkable for us to live in any other way than *as* his subjects.

We are not shoppers who can pick salvation off the shelf and leave everything else behind. *We didn't pick* salvation for ourselves – *God picked us* for salvation, and for *everything else* he has in store for us, including suffering for the sake of Christ! But this brings us to the next thing that Paul says here in v. 29, and the main point that he is trying to make.

## **II. God's Gift to Us Is to Suffer for the Sake of Christ**

Paul says, "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." The Philippian Christians obviously know that their faith is a gift from God – the way Paul is saying this here, he is counting on them knowing this. His point is that their faith isn't the only thing God has given them. He has also given them this other gift – the gift of suffering for the sake of Christ.

If any of the Philippian Christians think otherwise, it is time for them to wake up. If any of them think that believing in Christ is all they have been called to do, it is time for them to stop deceiving themselves. Paul won't let them stay asleep – he won't let them remain deceived. He makes crystal-clear to them here that they haven't just been called to faith – they have also been called to suffer! They can't have one without the other, and they shouldn't want one without the other. They ought to gratefully accept *both* of these gifts – both the gift of faith in Jesus and the gift of suffering for his sake – and so should we.

And from all we've learned so far in this letter, from all we've heard Paul say so far, we know what he means by this. We hear it again in v. 30 – the kind of suffering Paul is talking about is the suffering these Philippian Christians face when they are persecuted by enemies of the cross of Christ. I'm going to come back to that in a few minutes.

But what I want to do first is simply to stop and talk about suffering in general. What I want to talk about for the next few minutes – what I think I *must* talk about in this day and age – is this simple idea that we are called to suffer at all.

The reason I think this is so important is because today there are many preachers out there who are preaching something entirely different. They are preaching that we are not called to suffer but to prosper. There's even a name for this kind of teaching – it's called the "prosperity gospel."

These preachers twist the Bible to make it say things it doesn't. Let me give you an example. Just a couple of weeks ago I heard a sermon in which one of these preachers took Romans 10:15, where we read, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" and he preached that the word "beautiful" there really means "flourishing," so that those who preach the good news flourish in this world – if you preach the good news, God will pour down his blessings upon you in this life. He completely ignored the whole metaphor of the watchmen seeing afar off the messenger coming with news, and seeing how his feet ran, so that they knew his news was good news. He turned the truth into a lie to convince people that they were not called to suffer for the sake of Christ, but to get rich instead.

This teaching is poison, and it is spreading from America into the rest of the world. Our missionary, Dan Eads, has been working hard to fight against this teaching. He just finished writing a pamphlet in Swahili to help the people there in Tanzania not to be deceived by this teaching. It is so appealing to people who are poor and who are suffering already – it promises health and wealth as guaranteed benefits of believing in Christ. It never teaches what Paul is teaching here – that the gift of God is not health and wealth in this life, but to believe in Christ and to suffer for his sake.

In fact, these preachers even preach the very opposite – that if you *are* suffering, something is wrong – your faith isn't strong enough! Just this week I heard a story from Pastor Scheele of a nursing home out west where he once served. They had had a preacher there from a church like this, a church that taught the prosperity gospel. Do you know what this preacher did? He told those poor people in that nursing home, people who were sick and some of whom were dying, that the reason they were suffering was because their faith wasn't strong enough. I feel sorry for the people who fall under the yoke of these preachers who lay such heavy burdens on them.

From what we see here in Philippians 1:29, I think you are on safe ground to say the very opposite – that if you *aren't* suffering, perhaps your faith isn't strong enough. But now I must turn to the kind of suffering Paul is really talking about here – not just the kind of suffering that anybody can face in this world, whether they're believers or unbelievers, not just poverty and disease, but suffering *for the sake of Christ*.

### **III. God's Gift to Us Is to Suffer in the Defense of the Gospel**

Look at v. 30, where Paul explains the kind of suffering he's talking about here. He tells the Philippian Christians that this suffering is what they will face when they are "engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have." In other words, this

is the kind of suffering they will face when they stand up for the gospel of Christ – the kind of suffering they will face as they defend the gospel in the face of their opponents.

Paul knows what he’s talking about. He has not backed down from preaching the gospel, and he has suffered terribly for it. He has been beaten for it more than once, whipped for it, stoned for it and left for dead, and even as he writes this letter he is in chains for it. And why? Because God graciously granted it to him.

Don’t forget the story of Paul’s calling, in Acts 9. When Jesus sent Ananias to him, he told Ananias:

Acts 9:15b-16 15 . . . “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

And that is exactly what Jesus has done. He has shown Paul how much he must suffer for the sake of his name. Paul knows very well that this is God’s choice for him. When he wrote a letter to the church in Thessalonica, he told them that the reason he had sent Timothy to them was “to establish and exhort you in the faith, that no one be moved by these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this” (1Th 3:2b-3).

But this persecution isn’t something that Paul alone would experience. This suffering isn’t just for apostles, nor is it just for the Philippian Christians he’s writing to in our passage this morning. No, it is for all Christians. In his letter to Timothy Paul wrote, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2Ti 3:12). We may not face exactly the same kind of persecution Paul faced, but if we are living the way we should be living we will face some kind of persecution, somehow, sooner or later.

This is what Jesus promised us – not health and wealth, not peace and prosperity in this world, but *suffering in persecution*, even within our own families. He told his disciples:

Matthew 10:34-39 34 Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

“Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me!” A lot of people don’t understand what this means. They think that to bear a cross just means to bear something difficult, like a cranky husband or a rebellious child or chronic pain in their body. But that’s not at all what Jesus meant, and that’s not at all the kind of suffering Paul is talking about here in our passage this morning. The cross we are given to bear is the cross of suffering that we are given the moment we turn to Jesus – the suffering we will face when we are faithful enough and courageous enough to take a stand for Jesus in this world.

Over and over we see this in the New Testament. Persecution is *normal* for us as Christians. How could it not be? If our Master was persecuted, how could we, his servants, be treated better than he was? Jesus told his disciples:

John 15:19-20a 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

If you believe in Jesus, then you cling to the promise that you are a child of God, right? But don’t forget what Paul told the Romans in the letter he wrote to them before coming to Rome in chains:

Romans 8:16-17 16 The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 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.

If you are a Christian, then this is the life you have been called to – a life of suffering with Christ the way Paul is suffering with Christ.

By the way, this kind of suffering isn’t something you can inflict upon yourself. Over the centuries many have tried. Christians have tried inflicting suffering upon themselves, some by beating themselves, others by wearing shirts made of hair that irritated their skin, and others by depriving themselves of whatever comforts they thought were too luxurious. But they were confused. The kind of suffering we are called to is a completely different kind of suffering. It is not something you can inflict upon yourself. It is something that only the people of this world can inflict upon you.

So don’t make the mistake of thinking that the way to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ is simply to deprive yourself of the comforts that other people enjoy. You can avoid air-conditioning, you can avoid pain-killers, you can embrace all sorts of suffering in this world – but unless you embrace the suffering that Paul is talking about here in his letter to the Philippians, you aren’t embracing the gift of suffering, for the sake of Christ, that God has given to you.

Embrace the gift! Accept it and be glad. That’s what Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 5:11-12 11 Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Rejoice and be glad! Do not shrink away in fear from the gift God has given you, Christians. It is a gift that the people of this world could never understand, but the people of God understand it and rejoice in it.

The apostles who were beaten in Jerusalem for preaching the gospel understood it. The Jewish council had them arrested:

Acts 5:40-42 40 and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

They *rejoiced* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Christ! This is the kind of suffering Paul is talking about in our passage this morning, when he tells the Philippian Christians to be engaged in the same conflict he has.

And this suffering, Paul tells us here, is a *gift*. It is just as much a gift as our faith, just as much a gift as the baby Jesus lying in the manger. You might wonder how this could be called a gift. It isn't the kind of gift you would expect under a Christmas tree. It is a gift that hurts in this lifetime. But it truly is a gift, a gift from our merciful and gracious God.

Think about it. What *do* you deserve from God? You and I deserve nothing but God's wrath. We have sinned against him, defied him to his face, over and over again. Yet God has loved us so much that he has given us this immense, staggering privilege – the privilege of being called his child, the privilege of being one of his soldiers who fight the good fight of faith.

Men who join the Marines push themselves to the breaking point for the privilege of fighting and bleeding and dying as one of the few, the proud, the Marines. They know what a privilege that is. It is worth everything they can give.

But the privilege of striving for the gospel, even bleeding and dying for the gospel, is an even greater privilege. And unlike the Marines, it is not a privilege you can earn. It is a privilege that can only be granted as a gift. And if you have believed in Jesus, then God has granted you this gift!

### **Conclusion**

Stop and let this sink in until it leaves you eager to embrace this gift, so eager that nothing else will satisfy you.

You have believed in Jesus – good! But “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.” Have you embraced this second gift of suffering for Christ?

What have you done since you believed? Have you born witness to Jesus? Have you spoken up about Jesus? Do the people around you – in your neighborhood or your school or your workplace or your extended family – even know you are a Christian?

Are you standing united with other Christians, “standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (Php 1:27b), or are you standing united with the people of this world, laughing with them, joking with them, and talking about everything *but* Christ, just so long as they all will still accept you, still think you are fun to be with?

If so, then give up those things!

Jesus gave up far more when he came to earth to lie in that manger in Bethlehem. He gave up far more when he lived a life of persecution, and he gave up even more when he suffered and bled and died, crushed beneath his Father's wrath for your sins.

So embrace the gift of suffering for his sake. Unwrap it, claim it as your own, and hold it dear to your heart for the rest of your life!

Stand up for Jesus, and rejoice when you suffer for it!