

"Now I rejoice in [my] sufferings for you, and I am filling up the deficiencies of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body, which is the church" (AT)

Numerous questions about concerning this verse: is Paul truly suggesting that Christ's afflictions were in some way inadequate or deficient? Is Paul speaking about atonement or ecclesiology? What are these "sufferings" and "afflictions?" Pick up any modern exegetical commentary and you are likely to find a multitude of variant readings. An excellent survey is found in Scot McKnight's recent commentary, if I might suggest one.

However, in considering our purposes here, I have been asked to give my (very brief!) reading of this particular verse in its context of the Epistle to the Colossians and I will attempt to do this. First, we must note that Paul's own sufferings are "for you" (*huper humōn*), the fledgling assembly in Colossae (1:2). What is difficult for us is whether Paul is himself in prison during this time. Col 4:18 might indicate this: "remember my chains," but Paul's situation is not *explicitly* as dire as it appears to be in Philippians or 2 Corinthians. In any case, we might conclude that Paul is somewhere in prison, a violent, dreadful place where many prisoners committed suicide rather than be found out to be members of the iron estate.

Paul then says something that has vexed all of us: he is somehow filling up the deficiencies of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh. What is clear is that this is clearly ecclesiological participation: the "body" of Christ is explicitly identified as the church (cf 1:18) and Christ's suffering in a horrific death (1:19-20). The somatic imagery of "head" and "body" throughout 1:15ff suggests more than mere ecclesiology. Rather, it suggests that the church is an organic unity that can suffer, and will suffer, as Christ suffered. Paul's entire outlook concerning suffering (2 Cor 8-13) is one of stark and resigned acceptance. Paul knew to proclaim Jesus as Lord was an affront to the powers and the sovereignties of the ancient world.

More to the point, I do not believe Paul is asserting that Christ's atoning death lacked something in terms of potential. Christ's death accomplished reconciliation for all who persist in faithful allegiance to Jesus the King (1:21-23). Instead, I believe that Paul is asserting an argument that will climax later. Paul's own suffering ("my flesh") is a testament to what the church is called to be: a place where men and women participate in the life and death of Christ, who was himself impoverished (Phil 2:6; 2 Cor 8:9) so that we might participate in his glory. Christ accomplished the overthrow of Satan and the Powers, but the church still has to participate in the victory of God by going out and making disciples (Matt 28:19-20). In that sense, one could say that Paul's own suffering for the church was "filling up" what lacked in Christ's death: a sacrificial life of proclamation to Christ's lordship over Caesar and the entire cosmic order. Jesus has given us the gift of his life, so that we might proclaim him. Paul's own chains and our own sufferings attest to the Spirit's work in our lives and we are commissioned to go out and fulfill the word of God (1:25).

Hence, participationist ecclesiology may be summed up with Paul's point that I alluded to earlier: "For you have died and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. Whenever

Christ—who is your life—might be manifested, then you with him will be manifested in glory" (3:3-4). This is not a call to leap into circumstances of suffering, such as staying in an abusive relationship. Rather, it is a call to recognize that suffering is a form of participation in Christ's own gracious example—as disciples in the local church, we are to go into the world as slaves of Christ Jesus to call people everywhere to participate in God's kingdom so that we might present all people as perfect in Christ (1:28).