



Filling Up the AFFLICTIONS of Christ

JOHN PIPER

The following is excerpted, by permission, from the Introduction to *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ: The Cost of Bringing the Gospel to the Nations in the Lives of William Tyndale, Adoniram Judson, and John Paton* (Crossway Books: Wheaton, Illinois, 2009). A PDF of the entire book may be downloaded at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/onlineBooks/ByTitle/4111_Filling_Up_the_Afflictions_of_Christ/

God's Painful Path to Reach All Peoples

More and more I am persuaded from Scripture and from the history of missions that God's design for the evangelization of the world and the consummation of his purposes includes the suffering of his ministers and missionaries. To put it more plainly and specifically, God designs that the suffering of his ambassadors is one essential means in the triumphant spread of the Good News among all the peoples of the world.

I am saying more than the obvious fact that suffering is a *result* of faithful obedience in spreading the gospel. That is true. Jesus said suffering will result from this faithfulness. "You will be hated by all for my name's sake" (Luke 21:17). "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). I am saying that this suffering is part of God's strategy for making known to the world who Christ is, how he loves, and how much he is worth.

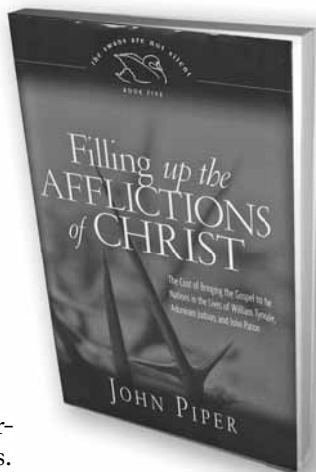
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This is both frightening and encouraging. It frightens us because we know that we may very likely be called to suffer in some way in order to get the breakthrough we long to see in a hard frontline missions situation. But it also encourages us because we can know that our suffering is not in vain and that the very pain that tends to dishearten us is the path to triumph, even when we can't see it. Many have gone before us on the Calvary Road of suffering and proved by their perseverance that fruit follows the death of humble seeds.

Jesus came into the world to suffer and die for the salvation of a countless number of believers from all the peoples of the world. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

"By your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

Suffering and death in the place of sinners was the way that Christ accomplished salvation. "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Galatians 3:13). "He was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5). We preach that. It is the heart of the gospel.



But this voluntary suffering and death to save others is not only the *content* but it is also the *method* of our mission. We proclaim the Good News of what he accomplished, and we join him in the Calvary method. We embrace his sufferings *for us*, and we spread the gospel by our suffering *with* him. As Joseph Tson puts it in his own case: “I am an extension of Jesus Christ. When I was beaten in Romania, He suffered in my body. It is not my suffering: I only had the honor to share His sufferings.”¹ Pastor Tson goes on to say that Christ’s suffering is for *propitiation*; our suffering is for *propagation*. In other words, when we suffer with him in the cause of missions, we display the way Christ loved the world and in our own sufferings extend his to the world. This is what it means to fill up the afflictions of Christ (Colossians 1:24)...

Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ²

We would be warranted at this point to be concerned that this way of talking might connect our suffering and Christ’s suffering too closely—as though we were fellow redeemers. There is only one Redeemer. Only one death atones for sin—Christ’s death. Only one act of voluntary suffering takes away sin. Jesus did this “once for all when he offered up himself” (Hebrews 7:27). “He has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26). “By a single offering [Christ] *has perfected for all time* those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14). When he shed his blood, he did it “*once for all*,” having obtained “*eternal redemption*” (Hebrews 9:12). “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5). So there is no doubt that our sufferings add nothing to the atoning worth and sufficiency of Christ’s sufferings.

However, there is one verse in the Bible that sounds to many people as if our sufferings are part of Christ’s redeeming sufferings. As it turns out, that is not what it means. On the contrary, it is one of the most important verses explaining the thesis of this book—that missionary sufferings are a strategic part of God’s plan to reach the nations. The text is Colossians 1:24 where Paul says,

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.

In his sufferings Paul is “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for . . . the church.” What does that mean? It means that Paul’s sufferings fill up Christ’s afflictions *not* by adding anything to their worth, but by extending them to the people they were meant to save.

What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is not that they are deficient in worth, as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe. What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ’s afflictions is not known and trusted in the world. These afflictions and what they mean are still hidden to most peoples. And God’s intention is that the mystery be revealed to all the nations. So the afflictions of Christ are “lacking” in the sense that they are not seen and known and loved among the nations. They must be carried by missionaries. And those missionaries “complete” what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by extending them to others....

May the Lord of the Nations

Give Us His Passion

When Paul shares in Christ’s sufferings with joy and love, he delivers, as it were, those very sufferings to the ones for whom Christ died. Paul’s missionary suffering is God’s design to complete the sufferings of Christ, by making them more visible and personal and precious to those for whom he died.

So I say this very sobering word: God’s plan is that his saving purpose for the nations will triumph through the suffering of his people, especially his frontline forces who break through the darkness of Satan’s blinding hold on an unreached people. That is what the lives of William Tyndale, John Paton, and Adoniram Judson illustrate so dramatically. My prayer is that their stories here will awaken in you a passion for Christ’s fame among the nations and sympathy for those who will perish for their sin without having heard the Good News of Christ. f

End notes

- ¹ Joseph Tson, “*A Theology of Martyrdom*” (an undated booklet of The Romanian Missionary Society, Wheaton, IL), p. 4.
- ² The following exposition of Colossians 1:24 depends heavily on the thought and words of my book *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), pp. 267–270.