

Christ-Centred Suffering

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[0 : 0 0] The scripture reading comes from Philippians chapter 1 starting in verse 27. Please follow along on the screen of your Bible. 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, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

There is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that 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.

Engage in the same conflict that you saw that I had, and now hear that I still have. This is the word of God. Great. Good morning, Watermark.

My name is Chris, for those of you who don't know me. And just really exciting to see you again this morning. Before we get into God's word, I just wanted to pray for us.

Father, thank you that your word is powerful. Father, just, we so need you. Lord, what you call us to is totally beyond ourselves.

[1 : 3 2] We desperately need your spirit to change us. We desperately need you to open our hearts to be willing for you to change us. We pray that your word would not just go into our ears, but go deep into our hearts, and really encourage us, lift us up, challenge us, and help us to see you this morning.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Great. We have been going through this series in the book of Philippians together.

And Philippians is really a very apt book for us to be looking at, because in this season, I don't know about you, but I've been having a lot of conversations with people who are talking about citizenship, who are talking about B&O; passports, and are talking about the fact that they feel like Hong Kong is not the home that they thought it was before.

Maybe things have changed. Some people have said to me, I don't feel it's the same as it used to be. And so we're in a situation where, with social distancing, with the security law, people are feeling a sense of restlessness, and a sense of, where do we belong?

Well, Paul understood, the person who wrote the book of Philippians understood these feelings, because he had been locked up in a jail in Rome, awaiting trial and possible execution for sharing the gospel.

[2 : 5 4] And he's surrounded by people who are wanting to intimidate him, shut him up. It's a difficult situation for him. And he then speaks to a church in Philippi, which is in Greece, over a thousand miles away, who are also struggling with opposition surrounding them on the outside of the church, and then internally there are some tensions in the church.

And Paul could feel hopeless, helpless, all this way away, not able to help them, but instead what he does, he writes the letter of Philippians to them, and he tells them, he offers his own life as a model to them of how to respond in a situation.

He says, imitate me. Why? Because he is trying to imitate Jesus. And so, in the times of difficulty, Philippians is telling us, you've got to have a purpose, you've got to have a vision, which is beyond yourself, beyond your own comfort, for us to be able to thrive.

And Oscar last week showed us what Paul's vision and his ambition was. He showed us this, he said, Christ said, Paul said, my greatest hope, my greatest expectation, is that with courage, full courage, right now, Christ may be honored in my life, whether by life or by death, whatever I'm going through, I want Jesus to be glorified.

And then he's going to say to the Philippians today, that is how you are to now respond, imitate me. So he's going to say to them, how do you imitate him?

[4 : 31] By glorifying Jesus, through being a united, courageous, fearless, suffering, gospel proclaiming church, in the midst of difficulty. In difficulty, in social distancing, in all the different challenges we may go through, we're often tempted, to be disunited, to be cowardly, to be comfortable, to be self-focused.

And Paul's going to say, don't do that, lift your eyes up, there's a bigger purpose, there's a greater vision. So how do we live, with courage and purpose, at this time?

And Paul's going to give, a key identity, he's going to say, Christians have a new passport. And then he's going to play that out, in two implications of that.

One which is, so therefore we've got to be, firm and fearless, on the mission God has called us to be. And we've also got to see, suffering as grace. So that's where we're going, this morning.

So first of all, Christians, have a new passport. I've got a passport with me. This is a British passport. A lot of people in Hong Kong, right now, would love to have something like this, to, or a B&O;, or whatever, because people, are thinking of spending, all kinds of money, jumping all, through all kinds of hoops, to get one.

[5 : 52] Why? Because the idea of being a citizen, in a land, gives you rights, and privileges, and people want that idea. Where you are a citizen, has a profound, implications for your life.

And that can even mean, for example, if you are a citizen, of the US, you've got to live, in line with your citizenship, so you've actually, still got to pay taxes, in Hong Kong, wherever you are.

Because your citizenship, counts. Paul says, in verse 27, he says, let your manner of life, be worthy, of the gospel of Christ.

And we don't get this, in the English translation, of this, but in Greek, this is literally, live as citizens, worthy of the gospel of Christ. Citizens of Philippi, they prided themselves, on the fact, that their city, had the same status, as Rome, in terms of tax privileges, and all kinds, of legal benefits.

And to live, as worthy citizens, was to live, loyal to the Roman emperor. Well, Paul is saying here, you may be, Philippian citizens, you may be, Hong Kong citizens, British citizens, wherever you're a citizen from, but, in chapter 3, verse 20, he says to Christians, your ultimate citizenship, is not on earth, it's in heaven, where Jesus, rules and reigns.

[7 : 19] You didn't have to apply, for this citizenship, you didn't have to pay money, for it, you didn't have to earn it, it's a free gift, found through Jesus Christ. Which means that, if you have trusted in Jesus, you are now, a dual citizen.

You have a heavenly passport, and an earthly passport, but your heavenly one, counts way more, than your earthly one. Because with Jesus, you have a higher status, greater privileges, than any, B&O;, Hong Kong, Canadian, whatever passport, you may want, can ever give you.

And nobody, can take those privileges away. Now, I want to show you, maybe you're not a Christian, maybe you're, on a journey, I want to show you, why this is utterly revolutionary.

Because you see, the way our world works, it works by what I call, the M curve, the me curve. So, astronomy, has shown us, that the universe, is just so vast, that we as humans, are just this little speck of dust, in this incredible world.

And if, atheism tells you, that there's no God, and if there's no God, then all we are, is just insignificant, bits of matter, in the vast, and meaningless universe.

[8 : 43] What that means is, you and I, are just the product of chance, and we, have no intrinsic value, meaning, or purpose ourselves, we've got to create it. We've got to make it up ourselves.

So what happens is, if that's where you start, at the bottom, you've got to make your way up, you've got to try and elevate yourself, to give you some kind of status, boost your comfort, boost your reputation, boost your power.

And then what often happens is, things come up, which then threaten that, and they threaten to mess up our plans, mess up our comfort, and then we just keep fighting, to keep pushing ourselves up again, and pushing ourselves up again.

Trying to stay in control of our lives. Isn't that how many bosses, politicians, corporations work, we're all trying to be in power, and keeping ourselves, in some kind of power and status.

Because earthly citizens, are shaped by the M curve. We're trying to make it all about ourselves, trying to find purpose, and meaning, and identity, through our performance. But the hymn in chapter 2, of Philippians, which is the centerpiece, of the book of Philippians, which everything flows out from, shows that Jesus' life, was not shaped like an M, it was shaped like a J.

[9 : 57] It's what in economics, and what the author Paul Miller calls, the J curve. You see, the gospel says, you are not just a meaningless bunch, a purposeless bunch of molecules.

Because God created, the whole universe. And this God, out of love, has come down, to insignificant, and not just insignificant people, but selfish, rebellious, unloving people.

And he, has come down, and given us, infinite worth, by bringing, coming to our level, though he was in very nature God, though he was equal of God, though he was at the, the top of the J, he didn't cling to that right, to be honored as God, but he humbled himself.

He went down, even to the point of death. Instead of wiping us off the planet, for our death, he came, he became our servant, and he put the towel around his waist, and served us, even to death.

And through death, he rose victorious, and now he is exalted, and at his name, every knee shall bow. He comes up to the highest place, so that everyone will honor, one day, him as Lord.

[11 : 15] That's the J curve, that is actually, the curve of what love, truly looks like. You see, there's no other boss, there's no other leader, there's no other thing, that you can look to, whose life, is pictured, in that level of love.

And he did it, to show us, both his glory, but also to draw us, to himself, in relationship with him, to then give us an identity, of such worth, and such value, with purpose, that we're now saints, we belong to him, we're sacred.

We're new citizens, of a heavenly kingdom. And that means, you're secure. If you know this, you're free. We're free, to die to ourselves.

We're free, to serve others, and go down, to go up. Because we don't need, to create our own identity, our reputation, because we already have it, from a king of kings, and the lord of lords, and he's done everything for us.

That is good news. That is good news, in a world of performance, and striving, to make ourselves great. Good news, and heavenly citizens, people who get this, live lives, not just to go, oh thank you Jesus, for giving me this status, now I can carry on, living the way I want to.

[12 : 35] No, heavenly citizens, live lives, which are worthy, of this gospel. Which means, that Christians, are not just those, who try and, work hard, and be nice, and be good moral people.

No, Christians, are those, whose lives, are patterned, entirely, by Jesus. Which means, we, are increasingly, looking in our lives, less like the M curve, and more like the J curve, in our lives.

That's what it means, to live life, as the citizens, of the heavenly kingdom, worthy, of the gospel, of Jesus. So there's two implications, that Paul, comes out from this.

The first implication, he says, Christians, who, if you get, that you have this new passport, this new identity, this new citizenship, this new status, Christians, are firm, and fearless, in the mission, the purpose, that Christ, has given them.

You see, the Philippians, are facing, pressure, from the outside, and the inside. Opponents, are mocking them, they're marginalizing them, there's temptations, to feel like, they just want to, fit in with the way, everyone else is living, the heat's on.

[13 : 52] And there's tensions, inside the church, there's some rivalry, going on, a couple of women, Euodia and Syntyche, which we see in chapter 4, they've got offended, with each other, they're not talking, to each other. It seems like, there's just, the heat is on.

And when the heat is on, we tend to, look in, and turn in on ourselves. But Paul says, living the Jacob, of citizens, worthy of Jesus, looks like, when a church is under pressure, this, he says, you are standing firm, in one spirit, with one mind, striving, side by side, for the faith, of the gospel, not frightened, in any way, by your opponents.

You see, he's using two images here. One is a military image, and the other is an athletic image. The first image, is standing firm, in one spirit. The image is taken, from the Roman military formation, where soldiers, would have shields, which they locked together, alongside each other, and they would move forward, with their spears, kind of pointing through, and so they were totally, impenetrable.

And it was devastatingly successful, because they were just, this one mass army, moving together. And Paul is saying here, as a church, don't get distracted, from Jesus, and the gospel, and who he is.

No, your mission, is to be one, and focusing on him. And then he says, secondly, an athletic image, he says, striving, side by side, for the faith, of the gospel.

[15 : 27] And the word, that striving side by side, it's an athletic term, meaning competing, like an athletic, like maybe a rugby team, together, you've got the same goal, together.

You're not pulling apart, you're not doing your own thing. And he's saying, a church that is following, that J curve, will be looking, actively, to help each other, to love Jesus more.

And they're putting, all their effort in, as a team, as one, to make Jesus known, to others. Even in social distancing, that's what our call is.

Even in the security law, in any, and every circumstance, Paul has modelled, even in prison, that his goal, is that Jesus might be made known.

And that's what he's calling the church to be, this army, on a mission. That's what we're called to. I wonder whether in, even in this time of, of social distancing, whether we see, our community groups, or Watermark as a whole, as a gospel team, as an army.

[16 : 33] Or are we just a bunch of individuals, who just kind of hang out together, but during social distancing, it's kind of out of sight, out of mind. Do you have a list, if you're a believer, do you have a list, of two or three people, in your community group, in your church, that you're regularly talking to, praying with, encouraging, with the gospel, and what you're reading in scripture?

Are we striving, side by side, for the gospel, thinking, how can we even be creative, during this time, to help others, come to know Jesus? Or are we wrapped up, in ourselves, in the M curve?

You see, imagine if in that Roman formation, what you get, is a couple of the soldiers, just decide, hey, I just fancy going on YouTube, more than being with these guys, it's a bit tough work, being an army, so, puts down his shield, takes out his iPhone, and, I mean, that's a disaster, for everyone.

It doesn't just affect him, it affects everyone. You see, when you do the M curve, you will not be the only person, who is shaped by that, the whole church is.

But when you live the J curve, you see, it actually turns us, out of ourselves, to really looking at others, and looking at Christ. We're called to be this united team, on God's mission.

[17 : 53] But, why do we often fail, to strive together, for the gospel, in this way? Well, because at some point, one of the reasons, is at some point, there is always a clash, between living the M, an M curve lifestyle, and a J curve, between heavenly citizens, and earthly citizens, and the demands they make.

And it can feel scary, if you're trying to live, as Christ's, we fear being rejected, if we truly live for him. We fear not belonging, we fear missing out.

Which is why, Paul has to say to them, don't be frightened, in anything, by your opponents. This is a clear sign, to them, of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

You know, there's a story told, of a, Maasai, Kenyan, tribesman, called Joseph, who encountered Jesus, and he was, utterly changed by him.

He was so excited, about the gospel message, that he went back, to his tribe, to tell them, this incredible news, of the love, of Christ for them. And, his tribe though, his village though, didn't just not listen to him, they actually came out, and they beat him, so hard, that he was unconscious, and then they dragged him out, into the bush, and left him to die.

[19 : 15] He actually, after a little while, he managed to regain consciousness, and kind of was trying to figure out, what was wrong, and he was wondering, did I just explain, this message badly? Did I miss something else?

So, he went back, to the village again, to try and share with them, the incredible news, that he'd heard. And as he went back to them, he got the same response, they came out, they beat him, with barbed wire, and they knocked him unconscious, and they dragged him out, into the bush again, to die.

This time, his wounds were more serious, so it actually took, quite a few days, for him to recover, but miraculously, he actually survived this. And beaten, and bruised, he decided, that he would go back, into the village, to share again, about Jesus.

And so, as he kind of, walks through, he walks into the village, and starts telling them, how Jesus is so amazing, his love for you, is so incredible. And they come out, and the women particularly, were beating him, with the barbed wire.

The last thing he saw, before he went unconscious, was suddenly, the women who'd been beating him, stopped, and they were weeping. He actually woke up, a few days later, in his own bed, being tended, by these same people, who'd been beating him.

[20 : 26] And he discovered, that the whole of the village, had come to Christ. Because what they had seen, they had rejected Joseph, but they had seen, in his courage, a sign.

They'd seen, that Joseph had something, that they didn't. That he had this, confident security, that they never had. He had a different, citizenship, from them, which made him, just ridiculously courageous.

Now we may not face, that kind of beatings, in Hong Kong. But I want to suggest, that actually, sometimes, we're not afraid of beating, we're sometimes just afraid, of that rejection, and embarrassment, or awkwardness.

And the thing is, we fear, the death, the going down, in the Jacob, of our reputation. That humbling, that Jesus went through. We fear that, because it's costly.

But Paul says, that Christians who see, just how beautiful Jesus is, they may feel afraid, of what it really means, to follow him. But they don't give in, to fear.

[21 : 34] They're clear, in the face of fear. Because you know, people may think, you're stupid, but people can't argue, with courage. You know, I remember hearing, about a lady, at inner city ministries, in Jordan, which is one of our mission partners.

And they've been reaching out, to some kids, I think in the park, and singing some Christian songs, and sharing the gospel with them. And then a neighbor, shouted out, from one of the windows, really angrily, like, shut up, otherwise I'm going to call the police.

And everyone was feeling, a little bit intimidated, a little scared. But one of the aunties, was not intimidated by this. She said, just give me, hold on a second, it's okay. And so she says, I'll go up and talk to him.

And so she disappears, for like 30 minutes, 40 minutes, I'm not sure how long. And then about, 45 minutes later, she comes down, with this guy, and says, oh it's okay, I've just shared the gospel with him, and he's just accepted Christ.

And everyone was like, how did you do that? That, that was crazy. But that kind of courage, became infectious.

[22 : 38] Because, how can somebody do that? It's not by, trying really hard, to muster up your own sense of, okay, positive thinking. She, she shows that actually, she'd seen something about Jesus.

She'd seen something, of the glory and beauty, and the love of Jesus, in the J curve. And she wanted to be like him. You see, I'm really challenged by this, this is really challenging.

That actually, as Christians, we're not called to just, accept the gospel, and get out of jail, free card. We're called to live the gospel. And we can only do that, with Christ at the center.

So I want you to just, reflect for a second. When was the last time, if you're a Christian, when was the last time, God called you, to do something, for the sake of the gospel, that you were afraid of doing?

That you were afraid of doing? What was your response in that? And if you're not a Christian, let me use Martin Luther's, King's phrase, if you've got nothing worth dying for, you've got nothing worth living for.

[23 : 50] What in your life, is worth losing everything for? And if you're on your deathbed, how valuable do you think that will be? So I'm going to give you, just a minute or so, to reflect or to discuss, with the person next to you, those questions.

And then we'll come back, and continue. And I'll be, Yeah.

Thank you. So, Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

[25 : 53] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Now, this is challenging.

I find this really challenging. But Paul says, Now, this is really crazy.

The word granted there means graciously given, freely given. It's the same word. It's the verb of the noun grace. And in Watermark, we often think that, we often say that the grace of God is what Christ has done for us.

Our salvation, our forgiveness, everything is a gift from him, this new identity. And it is. Nothing you can earn it. You can do nothing. It's grace. And if you're not a Christian, Jesus isn't looking for you to clean up your act to come to him and just be a good person.

He takes only sinners. And so we come empty-handed, trusting in his death and resurrection for us. But Paul says God doesn't just give the grace of salvation.

[27 : 14] God gives the gracious gift of suffering. Not just the fact of suffering that we all experience. But here he's talking about suffering for Christ's sake.

Suffering because you're living for the gospel. It's a gift with a bow tied on it. I don't know if you've ever thought of that. And Paul isn't this kind of masochist martyr who just loves pain.

That's not where he's going. But he's saying, The friend who was kicked out of home by her Muslim parents when she came to faith, that's grace. Grace. The lady who was passed over for promotion because she talked about Jesus too much, that's grace.

The youth who got laughed at by his friends because he refused to get drunk, that's grace. And if you think Paul is just a little bit crazy going on about this, Acts 5.

Jesus followers, they've seen the resurrected Jesus. And they have started proclaiming him. And they've just been beaten for sharing the gospel. And it says, And they left that place rejoicing that they've been counted worthy of suffering dishonor for the sake of the name.

[28 : 20] They've been beaten up and they're going, Wow, what a privilege. But if you're anything like me, sometimes aren't we often, you know, I told her I was a Christian and she looked at me weird and, Oh no, what did I do wrong?

You see, the J curve is completely counterintuitive. But it's beautiful. You see, when you go to the Avenue of Stars, you know, I have seen people excitedly go, Let me just find Jackie Chan's handprint.

And they run over to put their hands in where Jackie Chan's handprint was. And they go, Wow, I can't believe that I put my hand where his hand was. I've even heard, and this is maybe a little weird, but that actors like George Clooney have donated clothes for charity auctions.

But they fetch far more money if they're unwashed. Because people want to be able to smell George. They want to get so close to him.

Now, I think that's weird. But hey, some people have their thing. But what's the difference between the Apostle Paul, Joseph, that auntie, and so many of us? It's not that Jackie Chan or George Clooney they wanted to get close to.

[29 : 34] No, they wanted to get close to Jesus. And when their lives could bear the marks of Jesus, they saw what a privilege that this gospel message of a J curve of love for us, of death to resurrection glory, that most beautiful of love stories, that God is using in some way our lives to retell that message and for people to see just how precious Jesus really is.

Because we know that suffering on that Jacob leaves to glory. We're becoming more like Jesus as we go through the pain.

Now, I don't know about you, but the question that has really been coming through to me has been, how much do I want to be like Jesus?

How beautiful is he? Because if I see that Jesus is all that I need and all that I want, then suffering is grace because that's the path Jesus walked.

And we know where it ended. It ended with glory. And it will for us too if we walk that path. You know, I know of a guy from a Muslim background who I heard him say, he said, you westernize Christians, he was talking in the UK, but I think this is true for us here.

[31 : 00] You always go through these agonizing decisions when Christ calls you to surrender something or to face the cost of sharing the gospel and you wrestle with how it's going to affect this relationship or that relationship and so on.

And he said, those of us who are converted from a Muslim background, we don't wrestle with that so much. When we got baptized, we died to ourselves. We knew the cost already of losing our families, of our friends, all that we had.

And we saw that Jesus was worth it. So we don't have to keep wondering to ourselves whether to share or not. Because when you've lost everything already, there's nothing else to fear.

And every challenge and cost has only made us love Jesus even more because we see all that we have in him. I find that really challenging. Every athlete who wants to follow his hero is willing to go through the pain of training for the glory of Olympic gold.

Every army that wants to gain victory is willing to go on the battlefield knowing the cost. Every Christian that sees with this beautiful new identity and security and freedom of citizenship we have with a new purpose, with new meaning, though it costs us everything, if we have Jesus, we have nothing to lose.

[32 : 16] And that's where the gospel comes real. So this week, let me just challenge us. We can choose if we want to just keep living the M curve.

Always trying to keep everyone liking you. Always trying to manage your life. Keep everything in control. Keep yourself as comfortable as possible. Avoid any scary or awkward conversations. Or you can look at Jesus and see that the way down is the way up.

That we start seeing ourselves and realizing we can't do this by ourselves. We need each other as a team to encourage each other. So what if we were to actually ask our CG members to pray for us this week?

And maybe you've got a friend that you actually haven't talked much about the gospel with. What if you actually rang them up this week or talked to them and said, I want to apologize because with COVID and all the fears that there have been around, I've discovered something which has given me strength and hope.

And I haven't shared it with you. Could you give me a couple of minutes to share that? And whatever happens will be grace. Because you will begin, and I can tell you this from my own personal experience, when you discover that you can start taking gospel risks and that purpose beyond yourself, willing to lose your reputation for Christ, you suddenly discover an indescribable joy and freedom.

[33 : 44] and Jesus becomes more precious to us than ever before. And in challenges, we begin to thrive. Christ is glorified in a united, fearless, suffering, gospel-proclaiming church, striving side by side, even in this period of isolation, to know Jesus and to make him known.

Let me just pray for us. And I'd love you just to really be thinking right now, how precious is Jesus to me?

We don't want Jesus to just be a ticket, a get-out-of-jail-free card, because he's called us to live lives worthy of him.

We cannot do that in our own strength. We need a spiritual awakening in our hearts. But if you want that in your heart, if we want to have this boldness, then let's just get on our knees and pray.

Maybe pray with me. Father, Father, I recognize that so often I live the M curve.

[35 : 06] forgive me. Father, it scares me to think what it really might cost to follow you.

But when I look at the life of Christ, of what you've done for me, and I see beauty and love like no one else has ever offered, I want to be like you.

We want to be like you. So, Father, do a work in our heart. Change us. Give us opportunities this week to proclaim you. And let us be bold.

Let us not fear because we see we're already secure as heavenly people. Father, I pray for those who don't know you right now.

I pray you'd show them the foolishness of living the M curve, that it's so tiring and that we don't have to because we have a great Savior in Christ.

[36 : 10] Open our eyes, open our eyes, open our eyes to see you and change our hearts to want to love you with all of our lives this week, whatever the cost, and to see the joy of walking in your footsteps just as Paul did.

In Jesus' name, Amen.