

Session 5

Filling Up What Is Lacking

Colossians 1:24; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Romans 8:16-18

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim. The group discovers Paul's scandalous sentence, that he completes what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, and works out with Scripture and the Church what it can and cannot mean: suffering joined to Christ is not wasted; it becomes participation in his own redeeming work.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 1508 sets Paul's thorn and Colossians 1:24 side by side: the Lord sometimes answers our prayer for healing not with removal but with the grace to unite our sufferings to his Passion. This is the doctrine underneath the old Catholic phrase: offer it up.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Colossians 1:24 may be the most startling sentence Paul ever wrote: Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. Both halves scandalize. Rejoice in sufferings offends our instincts; what is lacking in Christ's afflictions sounds, on first hearing, like heresy. If a friend announced they were completing what is missing in the Cross, we would correct them. Paul says it under inspiration, so the sentence must be exegeted, not explained away, and every Christian of every confession has to reckon with it.

The classical Catholic resolution runs on one distinction: redemption accomplished and redemption applied. In its redemptive value, nothing is lacking: it is finished (John 19:30); by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb 10:14); CCC 614 says Christ's sacrifice is unique and completes and surpasses all other sacrifices, and CCC 618 builds on that uniqueness to teach our participation. What remains outstanding is the working out of that finished Passion in Christ's Body across time, and Christ has willed that his members participate in it: fellow heirs, provided we suffer with him (Rom 8:17); rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings (1 Pet 4:13); we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings (2 Cor 1:5); and may share his sufferings (Phil 3:10). Participation is the New Testament's own grammar. Our sufferings add nothing beside his; they are taken up inside his. Our own image for it: a drop of water taken into the chalice. And behind all of it stands a general principle of cooperation with grace, which the Catechism quotes from St. Augustine in its treatment of conversion: God created us without us; but he did not will to save us without us (CCC 1847). The load-bearing paragraphs for suffering itself are 618, 1505, and 1508.

Second text, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10: Paul's thorn. Note what happens: three times the apostle begs for removal, and removal is refused. What comes instead is not silence but a word: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. This is Job's pattern from Session 3 with the mechanism finally named: not removal, but presence with purpose. The verb in v. 9 (that the power of Christ may rest upon me) is literally that it may pitch its tent on me: tabernacle language. Weakness becomes the campsite of glory.

Third: rehabilitating offer it up. For many Catholics the phrase is a wound: it was used on them as a silencer, a way to dismiss pain. Name that failure honestly; the doctrine is its opposite. Offering it up does not mean pretending it does not hurt, refusing medicine, or minimizing anyone's pain, least of all someone else's: you may offer your own suffering, and you may gently invite a willing person to unite theirs to Christ, but you may never impose it, presume anyone's consent, or use it to wave away their need for care. It means an intention and a union: Jesus, this hurts; I join it to your Cross; use it for someone. Then you take the medicine, call the doctor, and accept help. Seeking healing is a real good: CCC 1508 opens with the charism of healing, and the Church has built hospitals for centuries. The doctrine does not glorify pain; it refuses to let pain be meaningless.

Pastoral note: the group was asked last week to bring one small suffering tonight. Keep it small; the point is to learn the gesture on something liftable, the way you learn to swim in the shallow end. Do not press anyone to disclose what they brought. And watch for the person whose suffering is crushing rather than small: for them, tonight's teaching must sound like company, never like a demand for performance. Christ carries them; their offering can be the size of a breath.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Vicarious bearing did not enter Scripture at Colossae; the group met it last week in the Servant who bore the griefs of others. Behind that stands the intercessor pattern: Moses offering himself for sinful Israel, blot me, I pray you, out of your book (Ex 32:32), and Paul takes up the same self-offering pattern when he says he could wish himself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of his brethren (Rom 9:3). And Israel's whole liturgy of offering, gifts lifted and joined to worship, asks the psalmist's question: What shall I render to the LORD for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation (Ps 116:12-13). In Christ, the fulfillment inverts and completes the pattern: the one perfect Sacrifice has been offered, and what remains for us to lift into it is everything we are, sufferings included. That is what Paul is doing in his flesh for the sake of the Body.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Paul II *Salvifici Doloris, apostolic letter on the Christian meaning of suffering, 1984 (summary)*

A major modern magisterial treatment of Christian suffering, written by a pope who had lost his mother, his brother, and his father before he was twenty-one, and who would later die his dying in public. Its heart, in substance: in the Cross, Christ did not abolish suffering, and did not fully explain it; he transformed it, so that every sufferer united to him becomes a sharer in his redemptive suffering, and discovers in suffering not only a mystery to endure but a vocation. Each person who suffers with Christ, he taught, is writing a page of the Gospel of suffering.

St. Rose of Lima *a saying preserved by her biographer P. Hansen, quoted in CCC 618*

Apart from the cross there is no other ladder by which we may get to heaven. The Catechism sets that sentence at the end of its paragraph on our participation in Christ's sacrifice; the words come to us through her Life rather than from a work she wrote. Our own gloss: the Cross is not one route among several for the comfortable to admire and the suffering to endure; it is the single ladder, and everything laid on it climbs.

St. Francis of Assisi *the account of perfect joy, from the early Franciscan tradition (summary)*

The Franciscan tradition recounts that Francis, trudging through winter mud with Brother Leo, taught him what perfect joy is not: not miracles, not learning, not converting the world. Perfect joy, he said, would be arriving at the friary frozen and hungry, being turned away as strangers, and bearing it patiently, without complaint, for love of Christ: because the gifts of God are not ours to boast in, and the Apostle says we may glory only in the Cross. The story comes from the later Franciscan tradition rather than from Francis's own pen, and the spirituality in it is thoroughly Franciscan. Our own way of saying it: the crucified Christ had made even rejection into something that could be given back in love.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- CCC 614: Christ's sacrifice is unique; it completes and surpasses all other sacrifices.
- CCC 618: on that uniqueness, Christ calls his disciples to take up their cross and follow him, granting a real participation in his sacrifice to those who suffer.
- CCC 1505: by his Passion Christ gave suffering a new meaning: it can now configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive Passion.
- CCC 1508: healing is a real charism and a real good to seek; and when healing is not given, the Lord's answer to Paul stands: grace sufficient, power perfected in weakness, sufferings united to the Passion (Colossians 1:24 quoted).
- CCC 1847: God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us (St. Augustine). The paragraph treats conversion, not suffering; we borrow it only as the general principle of cooperation with grace.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

DO NOT REVEAL · TRACK ACROSS SESSIONS

- *The small suffering.* Each person was asked to bring one. It is used silently in Send; no disclosure required. Its quiet connection to the sealed-sheet question closes there.
- *Tears thread (develop).* Paul's tears and afflictions join the thread (2 Cor 1:5; his thorn). One session of promise remains; do not preview the resolution.
- *Rom 8:18 (plant as memory verse).* The glory to be revealed is next week's session. Memorize it tonight; say nothing about where it points.

SESSION GOALS

1. Feel the full scandal of Colossians 1:24 before resolving any of it.
2. Discover the accomplished-applied distinction from Scripture itself, and the participation grammar of the New Testament.
3. Watch Paul's prayer for removal be refused, and grace given instead: the mechanism of redemptive suffering named.
4. Rehabilitate offer it up: an intention and a union, never a silencer, never a substitute for care.
5. Practice the gesture once, on something small.

THE 90 MINUTES

Opening prayer and settling in	5
Win: two opening questions	10
Build: Colossians 1:24 and the steelman, the thorn, Romans 8, the practicum	55
Send: two questions, including the silent offering	10
Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer	10

This plan uses the full 90 minutes. If the room runs long, drop in this order: (1) the Dig Deeper box, (2) Win question W2, (3) Send question S1. The steelman tonight is doctrinally load-bearing and may not be cut, and neither may the silent offering in S2.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have done everything needed for our salvation, and you have never left your people out of what you do.

Teach us tonight what your apostle meant, and what our own sufferings could become in your hands. We ask it through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN

W1. Offer it up: what did that phrase mean in the home you grew up in, if anything? Is it a warm memory, a wound, or a mystery to you?

W2. Tell about a time when weakness, yours or someone else's, accomplished something that strength could not have.

BUILD

Read Colossians 1:24 aloud, twice, slowly.

Q1. You were asked to come ready to say why this verse sounds wrong. Say it: what in this sentence should shock a Christian?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Two shocks. First: now I rejoice in my sufferings, which offends every instinct we have. Second, and worse: what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Lacking? If anyone else said they were completing what is missing in the Cross, we would correct them on the spot. Do not resolve the scandal yet; a text this strange must be allowed to be strange before it is allowed to be true.

Q2. Before we ask what the verse means, establish what it cannot mean, from Scripture itself. Find John 19:30 and Hebrews 10:14. What do they rule out?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

It is finished. By a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. Whatever is lacking, it cannot be redemptive value: the Cross lacks nothing as sacrifice, atonement, or victory, and the Church teaches exactly that (CCC 614: unique, completing and surpassing all other sacrifices). So the puzzle sharpens: what is left to be lacking, and how could Paul's flesh supply it? These two verses tell us what the answer cannot be; they do not yet tell us what it is.

STEELMAN · BUILD IT, THEN PRESS IT

Build it at full strength. A thoughtful Protestant friend says: this is exactly where Rome goes wrong. It is finished (John 19:30); Christ sat down because the work was complete (Heb 10:12-14). Colossians 1:24 is about Paul's apostolic afflictions in particular: sufferings endured in the work of the gospel, which genuinely benefit the church he serves, or perhaps an appointed measure of the messianic afflictions the Body must pass through before the end. Grant all of that, the friend says, and you still have not reached the disputed claim. Nothing here licenses an ordinary Christian to assign ordinary suffering, a bad back, a hard marriage, to another person's spiritual account. Offering up your arthritis to help save souls is works-righteousness wearing a rosary: it says, quietly, that the Cross was not enough, and it burdens suffering people with a job Christ already did. Notice the strength: it guards the sufficiency of the Cross, reads Paul in context, and names a real pastoral abuse.

Press it, and let Scripture do the pressing. First: read Paul's sentence again, all of it: in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. That is participation language, stronger than example language, and it is inspired: everyone must exegete it, not only Catholics. Second: the distinction. John 19:30 and Hebrews 10:14 fix the first half of it, accomplished, nothing lacking. The second half comes from Paul's own sentence and its neighbors: what is still being worked out is the applying of that finished Passion through Christ's Body across time, and Christ wills his members into that work. Third: the grammar is everywhere in the New Testament: fellow heirs, provided we suffer with him (Rom 8:17); rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings (1 Pet 4:13); we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings (2 Cor 1:5); and may share his sufferings (Phil 3:10). With, share, with, share: participation is Paul's native tongue. Fourth: the Catechism's own guardrail agrees with the friend's concern. CCC 618 grants participation in Christ's redeeming sacrifice precisely because that sacrifice is unique: our sufferings have no value standing beside his, only inside his. Our image for that, not the Catechism's: a drop of water in the chalice. And the general principle of cooperation, which CCC 1847 quotes from Augustine in its treatment of conversion, is: God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us. Last, concede what should be conceded: offer it up has truly been abused as a silencer, and Catholics should own that. The friend is also right that Paul is speaking first of his own apostolic sufferings; the Church's extension of the principle to every member rests on the participation grammar above and on her own teaching, not on Colossians 1:24 standing alone. The remedy for abuse is right use, and right use is the opposite of dismissal: it is the claim that no pain joined to Christ is ever wasted.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 aloud.

Q3. DISCOVERY. How many times did Paul beg for the thorn's removal, and what did he get instead of removal?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Three times, and the thorn stayed. What came instead was not silence but an answer: My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. This is a refused request, apostle edition, and it is Session 3's pattern with the mechanism finally named: God's alternative to removal is not absence but presence with purpose. The request was declined; the man was answered.

Q4. In verses 9b-10, Paul moves from enduring his weaknesses to boasting in them, even being content with them. What flipped?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The weakness became a campsite. The verb behind that the power of Christ may rest upon me can carry the sense of pitching a tent, and readers have long heard tabernacle overtones in it: glory taking up residence on Paul's frailty. Nothing about the thorn improved; everything about its meaning did. This is not masochism, and Paul is not pretending it does not hurt: it is suffering re-purposed, turned from dead weight into the place where Christ's power is visibly at work.

Read Romans 8:16-18 aloud.

Q5. Verse 17 has fine print: fellow heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him*. Weigh that little word with. What is the difference between suffering for Christ, instead of Christ, and with Christ?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The preposition is the doctrine. Not instead of him, as though his work were deficient; not merely for him, as though he were far away receiving reports; with him: co-suffering, co-heirs, co-glorified, a chain of with-words in Paul's Greek. We are not assigned a second cross beside his; we are taken up into his. And verse 18 posts the exchange rate: the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed. Paul, who had catalogued his own beatings, shipwrecks, and imprisonments, did that math and published the answer.

Q6. So make it Monday-shaped: what does offering it up actually look like, concretely? Build the answer together, and build its guardrails too.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

An intention and a union, usually with a word: Jesus, this hurts; I join it to your Cross; use it for someone, by name. Many Catholics anchor it each day with a morning offering of the whole day, works, joys, and sufferings together. Then the guardrails: you still take the medicine, call the doctor, and accept help, because seeking relief is also from God; you never pretend it does not hurt, because offering is not stoicism; and you offer your own suffering. You may gently invite a willing person to unite theirs to Christ; you may never impose it, assume their consent, or use it to dismiss what they need. Offered pain does not stop hurting. It stops being wasted.

DIG DEEPER (optional)

Find 1 Peter 4:12-13. Peter tells exiles under fire not to be surprised at the fiery ordeal, as though something strange were happening, but to rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings. The apostles treat participation in the Passion not as an elite vocation for mystics but as the ordinary address of a baptized life under pressure. Our inference, not Peter's sentence: on his logic, the strange thing would be a Christian life with no share in the Cross at all.

SEND

S1. Who in your life is suffering right now without any visible meaning to it, and it may be you? What would change, for them or for you, if that suffering were, in Christ, actually doing something?

S2. THE SMALL OFFERING. You brought one small suffering tonight. In silence, offer it now: join it to the Cross, and spend it on one person in this room, for whatever they wrote on their sealed sheet in Session 1. No one will know. That is rather the point.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1. Pray a morning offering each day this week, in these words or your own: Lord Jesus, I offer you this day, all I do, all I enjoy, and all I suffer, joined to your Cross, for those you put on my heart.
2. Once this week, in the actual moment of an ache, a frustration, or a fear, offer it by name for a specific person. Then take whatever care or pain relief is right for you.
3. Read Romans 8:18 each night before sleep, and let it be the last arithmetic of the day.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us."

Romans 8:18

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, your grace is sufficient for us, and your power is made perfect in our weakness.

Take what we offered in silence tonight and lay it on your Cross, where nothing is wasted. Make our smallest sufferings large in your hands, and keep us gentle with everyone still learning to lift theirs. Amen.

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Read aloud in session

- Colossians 1:24 (twice); 2 Corinthians 12:7-10; Romans 8:16-18

Discovery passages (group finds them live)

- John 19:30 and Hebrews 10:14 (Q2, what it cannot mean)
- 1 Peter 4:12-13 (Dig Deeper)

Cited in answers and steelman

- Hebrews 10:12-14 (steelman, build)
- Romans 8:18 (memory verse)
- Romans 8:17; 1 Peter 4:13; 2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; CCC 614, 618, 1847 (steelman, press)

Leader background

- Exodus 32:32; Romans 9:3; Psalm 116:12-13 (OT Roots)
- CCC 614, 618, 1505, 1508, 1847