

"THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY"

I. Introduction

- A. Up to this point in Colossians 1, Paul has focused his attention upon the faith of the Christians in Colossae, showing them how their new life in Christ is part of the outworking of God's plan to reconcile all things to himself in Christ.
1. In the passage we are considering tonight, Paul's focus shifts to his ministry as an apostle.
 2. Paul is not boasting or engaging in self-promotion here.
 3. It was necessary for him to defend his ministry because it was through his ministry associate Epaphras that the Colossians had come to faith in Christ.
 4. If the Colossians should lose confidence in Paul, they would also lose confidence in the gospel and become easy prey for false teachers.
- B. As we consider what Paul says about his ministry in this text, we will see how it teaches us three general principles about the Christian ministry.
1. This text shows us that the mode of ministry is suffering.
 2. It tells us that the substance of ministry is making known the mystery.
 3. And it says that the goal of ministry is making believers mature in Christ.

II. The Mode of Ministry: Suffering

- A. Our passage begins with a statement that we would never have expected from Paul.
1. He writes "in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."
 2. How could Paul, of all people, say that something was "lacking" in Christ's afflictions?
 3. Certainly he does not mean that Christ's death on the cross was insufficient to provide for the forgiveness of his people's sins.
 4. Paul said in Colossians 1 that we have redemption and forgiveness through Christ's sacrifice.
 5. Paul said that God has reconciled us to himself by Christ's death and has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.
 6. There is nothing that can be added to what Christ has done.
 7. So what does Paul mean when he says that there is something "lacking" in Christ's afflictions?
- B. He is not saying that Christ's finished work of atonement needs supplementing.
1. That is what the false teachers in Colossae were saying.
 2. What Paul means here is that the ongoing advance of Christ's kingdom in this present evil age is brought about through ministry that invariably involves suffering.
 3. Jesus made this clear right after he appeared to Paul on the Damascus road, telling Ananias, "I will show [Paul] how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."
 4. And in that same passage, Jesus asked Paul, "why are you persecuting me?"

5. Paul wasn't literally persecuting Jesus.
 6. He was persecuting Christians.
 7. Yet Jesus so closely identifies with his people that when they suffer in his name, he suffers with them.
 8. This is why in our text Paul refers to the church for whose sake he suffers as Christ's "body."
 9. This was the framework that Paul used to interpret the hardships that he experienced as he carried out his ministry.
 10. He knew that his sufferings were evidence of the fact that he belongs to Christ, and that his gospel truly is Christ's gospel.
 11. He shares in Christ's sufferings, and by doing so, the church is being built up.
- C. It is important for us to understand the role that suffering plays in the advance of the gospel.
1. While there can be times when the church enjoys a significant measure of success and influence as it carries out its ministry in a particular society, the Bible does not give us reason to think that this is going to be typical.
 2. Until the return of Christ, the church has a pilgrim identity as it lives in the wilderness of this world.
 3. Peter, James, and the author of Hebrews refer to the church as a collection of exiles, sojourners, and strangers on the earth.
 4. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4 that in giving the gospel ministry to the church, God has placed his precious treasure in mere earthen vessels.
 5. In Revelation 6 we are told that the martyrs in heaven "were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number

of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” (Rev 6:11 ESV)

6. When a church sets cultural influence as its goal, it loses sight of its calling to share in Christ’s sufferings.
 7. God uses affliction to sanctify us, to conform us to the likeness of Christ, and to provide examples that inspire and encourage us.
- D. I came across an example of this this week while reading about an OPC missionary named Bruce Hunt.
1. Hunt was serving as a missionary to Korea in the late 1930s when shrine worship of the Japanese emperor was imposed upon all Koreans in an attempt to eradicate Christianity.
 2. When Hunt was arrested and imprisoned for speaking out against this, his captors eventually offered to release him if he promised to go back to America.
 3. Here are Hunt’s reflections on why he chose to stay: “During the past two or three years I had been urging them, men, women, and children, to be faithful unto death. I had been encouraging them to suffer anything rather than to bow to shrines where the emperor was worshiped as a god... Could we take our family out of it and leave the Koreans to suffer alone with their families, particularly after I had been so strongly urging them to stand fast? No, we felt that as long as we were free to do so, we should keep our family there and continue to stand fast with our friends.” [*Fighting the Good Fight*, 77, 78]
 4. We need to remember that our God does not need us to jockey for cultural influence so that he can build his kingdom.
 5. His power is made perfect in weakness.

III. The Substance of Ministry: Making Known the Mystery

- A. The reason why Paul can rejoice in his sufferings is because he knows what they signify.
1. They are a sign that God's plan for the world has been fully realized in Jesus Christ.
 2. Paul uses the term "mystery" to refer to the revelation of this plan.
 3. This word is used in Scripture to describe something that was formerly hidden that is now being revealed.
 4. God began to reveal his plan of redemption immediately after the fall, when he declared that the offspring of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent.
 5. Everything else in the Bible is the unfolding of that great promise.
 6. But the meaning of that promise was only revealed in a progressive manner across the span of history.
 7. Up until the coming of Christ, it was only understood in types and shadows.
 8. Now that Christ has come, these things that were kept hidden in ages past have been fully disclosed and are being proclaimed to the ends of the earth.
 9. This is what Paul means when he speaks of "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints."
- B. Paul further describes this "mystery" as "Christ in you."
1. In other words, God's plan for the world, which has been fully revealed in Jesus Christ, is being enacted in the midst of these Christians in Colossae.
 2. Contrary to what the false teachers in Colossae seem to have been saying, Paul says in 2:3 that Christ is the one in whom all the

treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.

3. As one commentator puts it, that statement is “the christological high point of the letter... Christ is the one in whom is to be found all that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life pleasing to God.” [Moo, 169]
4. Christ is fully sufficient and fully supreme.
5. Nothing can be added to him.
6. He dwells inside his people by his Spirit, giving us the certain hope of future glory.

IV. The Goal of Ministry: Maturity in Christ

- A. Paul says that he proclaims Christ in order that he might present believers mature in Christ.
 1. This is the goal of the Christian ministry.
 2. God does not want his children to remain spiritually immature.
 3. He wants us to grow up in the faith.
 4. This is why it was not enough for Paul to see people get “saved.”
 5. He knew that this was not the final purpose of God for his people.
 6. God’s purpose in saving people is to transform them to the likeness of Jesus Christ.
 7. Therefore, the church’s ministry is to be focused not merely on making converts, but on making disciples.
- B. Paul mentions two components to his proclamation of Christ.

1. He says that he warns believers and that he teaches them with all wisdom.
 2. There are many things against which God's people need to be warned.
 3. There are all sorts of dangers in the Christian life.
 4. We need to be warned against false teaching, against immorality, against foolishness, against worldliness, against spiritual laziness.
 5. At the same time, the church's proclamation of Christ also involves a wide array of positive instruction.
 6. We need to know what God would have us believe and how God would have us live.
- C. Those who are called to serve in the Christian ministry have been given a monumental task.
1. Faithfulness in the ministry requires a great deal of work.
 2. Paul says that he toils in it.
 3. It is a matter of significant exertion.
 4. That being said, it is utterly impossible to be fruitful in this work if it is done in mere human strength.
 5. It has to be done in reliance on Christ and his power.
 6. This is why Paul says that he struggles with all Christ's energy as he toils in the work of the ministry.
- D. Paul had never met the Christians in Colossae, but his apostolic ministry was for their benefit.
1. The suffering that he endured as he carried out his stewardship of the gospel was a source of encouragement to them, and to all

believers.

2. By contending for the truth and combatting error, Paul ensured that the church would have a basis of unity around which they could be knit together.
3. By setting forth Christ, he set before God's people the source of all assurance and knowledge.
4. This served as a safeguard against the plausible-sounding arguments of the false teachers who were trying to delude the Colossians and lead them astray.
5. The church in all ages needs to be built up by the very same ministry.
6. If God's people stagnate and remain immature, they will be tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine.
7. Paul was not at the point of being worried that this was happening to the Colossians, but he wanted to do all that he could to protect them.
8. He does not address them as those who have already been infected by false teaching, but as those who need to be vaccinated against it.

V. Conclusion

- A. Today's church is faced with a wide array of threats.
 1. Many who profess faith in Christ are being led astray.
 2. The purpose of the gospel ministry is to build God's people up to spiritual maturity so that they are able to withstand the threats that assail them.
 3. While those who serve in the ministry are called to labor diligently in their work, it is also necessary for God's people to avail

themselves of the instruction that the church provides.

- B. You need to be a diligent student in the school of Christ for all of your days.
 - 1. If you are not, you will be carried about by every wind of doctrine.
 - 2. Never forget that you have a spiritual enemy, and that he is working diligently to lead you astray and bring you down.
 - 3. Make sure that you are keeping up with your spiritual immunizations by growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
 - 4. For if you are not firm in your faith in him, you will not be firm at all.