

## THE JOY AND STRUGGLE OF GOSPEL WORK

(SUNDAY, JANUARY 4, 2015)

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**Scripture Reading:** 10 Words; Col. 1:24-29

### INTRODUCTION

Imagine having a conversation with another Christian you met for the first time. In the midst of your talk this person said to you, “I rejoice in my sufferings for you and seek to fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.”

What do you think you would say in response?

Hopefully if someone said this to you in this coming week you would say, I also joyfully seek to suffer and labor for the spread of the gospel and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom.

Your place in the kingdom is not identical to that of the Apostle Paul.

However there is more that we have in common than what separates us.

Throughout Scripture is the challenge to not seek first your own meager dreams but to make sure your goals and dreams are in line with God’s purposes.

**Matt. 6:33** But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

I know none of us buy into the health and wealth gospel. We know it is totally unbiblical.

And yet the reason it is successful is because it appeals to that which we naturally seek – our own comfort and satisfaction.

There is no doubt we have been so richly blessed living in our nation. The danger for Christians in the US for many years now, has been to seek the American dream above the cause of Christ.

It is not that we seek poverty or suffering as holiness.

What we want to seek with all our strength is the kingdom of God. What should be our passion is to serve Jesus Christ and to even rejoice in suffering for the sake of His body, which is the church.

The verses that we consider from the end of Colossians 1 probably give the most clear testimony of what motivated the Apostle Paul in his over 30 years of service and suffering for the sake of Christ.

You are not an apostle. I am not an apostle. We don't have this in common among other things with him.

However there is much that should unite us. Because as we will later see, Paul uses some of the same language from this text in his challenges to the Colossians and to others.

Every believer as a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ is therefore called to rejoice, suffer, and labor for the spread of the gospel in love for God and the church of Jesus Christ.

We will look at Colossians 1:24-29 in three parts:

- 1) Filling up What Is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ, v. 24 and v. 29.
- 2) A Minister of the Mystery, vv. 25-27
- 3) Paul's Specific Ministry, v. 28

### **1. FILLING UP WHAT IS LACKING IN THE AFFLICTIONS OF CHRIST, V. 24 & V. 29**

**Col. 1:24** I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church,

This is amazing language isn't it?

How do we understand these words, specifically related to the afflictions of Christ?

Here is a great example of how we always want to let Scripture be our guide as we interpret other portions of Scripture.

There are easier and more difficult aspects in doing this.

Here is what is easy. Does Paul mean that the sufferings of Jesus were not sufficient and that something had to be added to them?

Definitely not!

Nowhere will you find in the Scriptures the idea that what Jesus endured on the cross was not sufficient or that our sufferings could ever pay for the sins of others.

Augustine wrote:

“Though we brethren die for brethren, yet there is no blood of any martyr that is poured out for the remission of sins. This Christ did for us. Nor has he in this conferred upon us matter of imitation, but ground of thanksgiving.”

So, what does Paul mean by filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ?

Here is where we pay attention to the rest of the verse and also seek to keep in mind the account of Paul's powerful conversion.

The end of this verse speaks of the church.

What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ has nothing to do with our Lord's suffering on the cross but has to do now with his body, the church.

The account of Paul's conversion is also key to understanding His ministry.

**Acts 9:3** As he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. **4** Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

**Acts 9:5** And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" Then the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

Do you see how these verses help us explain what Paul is saying in verse 24?

The afflictions of Christ are understood in terms of the suffering of the church of Jesus Christ.

Since we are in Christ, our sufferings for His sake, then are His sufferings.

In this present age, God has determined a definite amount of suffering that His people will endure.

Paul rejoiced in taking on as much of this total amount of suffering as possible. In this way, Paul would fill up what was lacking.

There is more we could discuss here related to the Servant Songs of Isaiah. I will simply add here, that Paul was driven by his great love for Jesus Christ, his love for the church of Jesus Christ, and his incredible knowledge of the OT Scriptures.

I have never yet found a passage in Scripture that tells me that I should pray that God would send suffering.

There is a hymn in the Trinity Hymnal with a line that I don't sing related to asking God to send suffering. I don't find this at all biblical.

However, there are many passages that call you and me to rejoice in suffering for the sake of Jesus Christ.

**Rom. 5:3** And not only *that*, but we also glory in **tribulations**, knowing that **tribulation** produces perseverance;

There are also many passages that call you to passionately love the body of Christ.

If in your service for Jesus Christ you are finding difficulties. Then rejoice!

And our prayer should always be, Lord strengthen my love for you, my love for your church, and my willingness to rejoice in suffering for the sake of your body.

Here it is appropriate to also consider the final verse of this chapter.

**29** To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.

There is no true service that does not involve love and some degree of either difficulty or suffering.

Labor for the Lord is never easy.

It demands that you strive to this end. This verb striving is where we get our word agony. Here the idea is being focused on a goal. You are called to strive in terms of a clear purpose that God gives for your life.

And yet we do this not in human strength or spirit, but according to the powerful working of God which works in us mightily.

## **2. A MINISTER OF THE MYSTERY, vv. 25-27**

**Col. 1:25** of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, **26** the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. **27** To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Paul identified himself in various ways at the beginning of his letters and in other places.

Look back to Col. 1:1. He identifies himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ.

In Phil. 1:1, Paul and Timothy are identified as slaves or bondservants.

Here in Col. 1:25, Paul calls himself a minister which also could translated as a deacon or servant.

It is an expression of humility but also one of purpose.

Paul also speaks of the stewardship from God which he has been given. This word stewardship in Greek is where we get our word economics.

Dennis Johnson says that in the Greco-Roman world a steward was a slave who was given great authority, a combination of a British butler and a ranch foreman in the American West. A steward owned nothing but controlled virtually everything in the household and in the estate.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, Paul says that his duty was to fulfill the word of God. What an incredible duty to be given.

To fulfill the word of God is to preach it powerfully to all people through the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we can say here is that Paul had a very clear sense of purpose and calling. This he enjoyed for the day of his conversion to the day the Lord called him home.

This is one thing that we do not have precisely in common with Paul. The Lord Jesus Christ has not revealed his glory to you in such a powerful way that you were blinded and heard the audible voice of our Lord directing you.

However, every believer has been given spiritual gifts and a calling.

Often then you should consider the gifts that God has given to you and ask how can I best be of service?

You don't have to be an apostle, a pastor, a missionary, or an official teacher to also seek to fulfill the word of God.

May God impress upon each one of us what He would have us to be doing. How can we best use our time and energy for Him?

As Paul ministered throughout the Roman Empire he looked for opportunities to preach to both Jews and Gentiles.

Listen to an important example of this from Acts 13:44 and following.

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Dennis E. (2009-11-24). *Him We Proclaim* (Kindle Location 1695). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

**Acts 13:44** On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God. **45** But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. **46** Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. **47** For so the Lord has commanded us:

“I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ”

**Acts 13:48** Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

This passage does not mean that Paul ended his attempts to reach Jews with the gospel. In Acts 17 and 18 you find Paul still going to synagogues to share the glorious message of salvation so as to reach both Jews and Gentiles with the message of salvation.

In a particular city, however, when the message Paul brought was rejected, Paul would leave the synagogue and seek for other opportunities for preaching mainly to those of the nations or Gentiles.

It was in this ministry to Jews and Gentiles that the mystery hidden for ages and generations was revealed.

The word mystery is used about 20 times in Paul’s writings, not all with the same meaning. Here it means “God’s plan of salvation involving the admission of the nations (Gentiles) into the freshly constituted people of God and into the benefits of the new covenant on equal terms with the Jewish believers.”

Abraham was promised that all families of the earth would be blessed through him.

Listen also to the shortest Psalm in the Bible, Psalm 117.

Praise the LORD, all you (nations) Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples! For His merciful kindness is great toward us, And the truth of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 117)

How would all the nations be blessed in fulfilling the promise given to Abraham?

How would the nations be brought to the place of bringing praise to the LORD?

Would this happen as Gentiles all became Jews?

That is what some would have taught.

But this is not how this glorious mystery would be fulfilled.

It would be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It would be fulfilled as men and women heard the message of the gospel and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord.

Listen to a very similar passage from Ephesians 2.

**Eph. 2:11** Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands— **12** that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

**Eph. 2:19** Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

At the end of verse 27, Paul states that the mystery is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The pronoun you is plural. This doesn't mean that we don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but here the emphasis is on God's presence made known among us together.

What Paul says here is one of the key themes found throughout Scripture.

Adam and Eve were terrified at the mighty presence of the LORD after their great rebellion.

Moses longed to see the glory of God.

God led His people in the wilderness through two signs indicating His presence – the cloud during the day and the pillar of fire at night.

The tabernacle and temple both were to be symbols of God dwelling with His people.

In Ezekiel 10, the prophet was given a vision of the glory of the LORD departing from the temple.

Some of the promises that Scripture gives to us are so amazing that we don't grasp their fullness. We don't appreciate the magnitude of what God offers to us.

What greater blessing could we now enjoy than to have Jesus Christ dwelling among us?

With this present reality is then the hope of even greater glory still to come.

What we now enjoy is the down payment of joy and glory that are indescribable!

### **3. PAUL'S SPECIFIC MINISTRY, v. 28**

**Col. 1:28** Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

How did Paul carry out the calling he was given to fulfill the Word of God?

Verses 28 and 29 answer this question.

Paul, the other apostles, and those who labored with them preached Jesus Christ.

Isn't this a beautiful statement?

And from what we know in the NT, this is not just some simplistic repetition of the name of Jesus.

To preach Jesus Christ is to preach the Word of God and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

To preach Jesus Christ is to preach the message of God's glorious work of salvation found in Him.

To preach Jesus Christ is to preach about God's wrath, holy hatred, justice, and the only way of salvation.

Do you know the best thing that you could ever pray for me in terms of my preaching? It would be that I also would preach Jesus Christ.

In terms of preaching Jesus Christ, Paul describes two aspects of his ministry – warning and teaching every man in all wisdom.

These two verbs interestingly along with the word wisdom are used later in Colossians in terms of our duty to each other.

**Col. 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all **wisdom, teaching and admonishing** one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

The verb admonishing is the same verb warning.



It is the basis for the term *nouthetic* that has gained prominence through Jay Adams in terms of nouthetic counseling, that is warning that is given to others in terms of the Word of God rather than psychological techniques.

Since this word warning is used in terms of the local church it doesn't have to simply mean here that Paul's ministry was warning unbelievers and teaching believers. Some suggest such and it is not a ridiculous suggestion, but warning and teaching can apply to both believers and unbelievers.

Paul spoke in Acts 20:31 about his ministry in Ephesus for three years consisting of warning everyone night and day with tears.

Teaching and warning beautifully fit together. Warning or admonishing is an urgent, passionate appeal to hearers to respond to God's truth.

Paul did not simply preach the facts and let people just take it, leave it, and figure it out on their own.<sup>2</sup>

In verse 28, Paul says he did this in all wisdom.

This is quite a thing to say in a culture that was preoccupied with "wisdom."

Paul was not boasting of his impressive ability to speak and certainly not to entertain.

Rather, because Paul preached Jesus Christ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom, he was able to present the true reality of life and call for his listeners to respond.

Now it is certain that the world in rebellion thinks the message of the cross is total foolishness. And yet, seeking to faithfully share the gospel with others means calling people to consider the ultimate reality of life and the purpose for all things.

What phrase in verse 28 is repeated three times?

Repeated three times are the words **every man**.

Paul's love was for the church of Jesus Christ but his desire as should be our desire is to see all men and women confronted with the truth.

Our belief in God's sovereignty should never mean a restriction of gospel ministry.

May God strengthen our desire and burden to this great end.

Finally, let us consider the end of verse 28.

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, (2009-11-24). *Him We Proclaim* (Kindle Locations 1495-1496). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Paul's ultimate goal in ministry in terms of individuals was to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

Recall from last week we noted the verb present in verse 22.

In Christ we will be presented to God the Father holy, blameless, and above reproach.

Paul's focus in preaching Christ was directed to this same end.

As Dennis Johnson has written, "The goal of preaching is not fully achieved when a rebel becomes a child of God. Christian preaching has as its purpose nothing less than the complete conformity of every child of God to the perfect image of Christ the Son."<sup>3</sup>

### **CONCLUSION:**

**Be part of joyfully suffering and laboring for the gospel.**

The Lord's Supper beautifully connects with this passage.

The work of Christ in terms of His suffering for our salvation is finished!

Our Lord declared this on the cross before he took His last breath. "It is finished."

It is based on this finished work that you are given the comfort and peace you need to then consider the call to joyfully suffer and labor to see the continued spread of the gospel and the expansion of our victorious Lord and Savior's kingdom.

The strength you need to do this is found in Him.

The meal reminds that we serve only because He works in you and in me mightily.

The meal reminds us of what an incredible blessing we have been given – Christ in us, the hope of glory!

**Prayer**

**Hymn: 359**

### **Benediction – Hebrews 12:1-3**

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy

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<sup>3</sup> Dennis E. Johnson, (2009-11-24). *Him We Proclaim* (Kindle Location 1171). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.