

God's Strategy

Colossians

By Ken Temple

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Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

Turn to Colossians 1. It's amazing how Ted and I did not coordinate and now several lines from a couple of those songs really fit with what we're going to talk about today. If you want a title to today's message, the short version is "God's Strategy." God's strategy. The longer wordy title is this "God's grand strategy and plan of spreading the gospel is through suffering and churches and weakness." God's strategy in history, God's great grand strategy and plan is of spreading the gospel, is through suffering and churches and weakness.

So Colossians 1:24. Let's just pause for prayer and then we'll read the verse.

Father, I thank you for the privilege today, thank you for your Holy Spirit, thank you, Father, for your eternal Son Jesus who became flesh, who lived a perfect life and suffered and died on the cross, atoned for sin, satisfied your justice against sin and rose from the dead with power, as we heard read in the gospel of Matthew. We praise you, Lord, and that you are seated, Lord Jesus, at the right hand of God the Father and you are interceding for your people, the church, and the church is made up of all sorts and kinds of local churches all over the world in many different peoples and nations, and yet there are still some peoples and nations and ethnicities that don't have a church, that don't have a witness, that don't have the gospel even today. Thank you, Lord, for what you are going to do. I pray that you will bless everyone spiritually and cause us all to be changed and grow and glorify your name, glorify yourself. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Colossians 1:24. The Apostle Paul says,

24 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,

That's an amazing passage. I remember the first time I read that, I went, "What do you mean there's something lacking in Christ's afflictions?" There is nothing lacking in the power and the worthiness of Christ's death on the cross and his sufferings, his afflictions, there's nothing lacking in the power of the atonement, the only thing lacking is the presentation, the propagation, the spreading of the truth of his atonement on the cross and

his resurrection to all the nations, the spreading, the evangelism and missions and the strategy of God to get his truth to all the nations. The Apostle Paul says, "That's the only thing that's lacking and the willingness to suffer for that message and live it out before people, who suffer by being weak, who suffer by telling the message, explaining the gospel, preaching the gospel, sharing the gospel, going into different cultures, learning their language, being with the people suffering and opportunities to respond rightly to that. That is what fills what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." That's the only thing lacking. Christ died in history, he came, he entered into this earth in history, he lived a sinless perfect life, he died on the cross, he satisfied the justice of God, he satisfied the wrath of God against sin, he rose from the dead and he gave this great strategy and plan to the disciples and he said, "Go and make disciples of all the nations."

And here the Apostle Paul continues that idea. In verse 25 he says, "of which," for the church. Read verse 24 again, "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, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God," I'm reading from the ESV. I really like the New American Standard better from 1977 and I've just noticed recently the '95 and the 2020 updates change stuff and so I was a little bit thrown off when I was seeing the new updates because my 1977 NASB has fallen apart and I can't find anything if I bring it to preach. I tried to get it rebound and the guy said there is no way. He sent it back to me. I don't know. So I like what, I think it was Spurgeon or somebody said, the Bible that is worn out is owned by someone who is not. I like that.

"I come to you in weakness and in fear and in trembling." This is such an amazing passage, an amazing verse and a heavy verse talking about suffering. The ESV he says here, "the stewardship," or the plan, or the strategy, or some versions translate it "administration," some versions translate it "plan," some versions translate it "commission, dispensation" is the old way the King James would translate it. It's this grand massive plan and strategy of God. It comes from a word where we get our word "economics" from. Economics actually means "the law of the house or the management of a household," and in Ephesians 1:10, he uses it there and also in Ephesians 3:9. You can look at those. God's sovereignty and providential plan, his strategy for us in continuing the ministry of the church all through history ever since the Apostle Paul, this was written for us today.

Have you ever considered why God has allowed such upheaval of Western society recently, of such destruction of thinking, of such destruction of thinking about male and female and sexuality and law and society and culture, the destruction of 30 cities last summer, the philosophies that are gaining power over a Christian worldview that for centuries the Western world had the blessing of a Christian worldview that understood right from wrong, that understood that God our Father is the Creator of all things? That goes all the way back, that hymn, I love that, it goes all the way back to the early creeds of early Christianity, "I believe in God the Father, the Creator, that Maker of all things, of all things visible and invisible, things in heaven and on earth." And yet modern philosophies, evolution, Sigmund Freud, psychology, there's a third one that really

affected our modern life, oh, Marx, Marxism. Those are the three biggies over the past two or three centuries and now we're seeing the fruit of these philosophies. The philosophy of Charles Darwin and Evolution, that we're all just random chemicals bouncing off one another. The philosophy of Marx and Engels of Marxism. The philosophy of Sigmund Freud. These are three powerful philosophies and yet in this same book in Colossians 2:8, he says, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition." These are philosophies that humans come up with. They're not from God. "According to the elementary," the ESV says, "elemental spirits of the world," or the elementary principles of the world, the things that human beings think of within themselves. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians because they were being infected by heresies, legalism, asceticism, mysticism, all sorts of philosophies that were coming into the church at Colossae.

Have you ever thought about why God has allowed these kind of things in our day? Thinking over it a lot over the past few months, hearing Pastor Ty talk about this spiritual warfare series that he did, thinking about when he talked about "keep calm and carry on," the series he's been going through Ezra and Nehemiah. Maybe God is trying to destroy our idols of comfort, destroy our idols of patriotism. Patriotism is not bad but it can become an idol, our comfort of modern life and technology. Every time I study and I'm sitting there and, you know, especially when I study this passage and I go, "Lord, I haven't really suffered much like what the Apostle Paul is talking about, able to drink coffee and see all my books, being in the comfort of air conditioning." And then you think about the Lord's prayer where Jesus said, "Give us this day our daily bread." They had to go out and get their food every day and now we have the blessing of refrigeration and supermarkets, grocery stores. We have the blessing of taste buds that God has given us.

So let's look at verse 24. I have four aspects of this passage of verse 24. First of all, suffering for the spread of the message of the church or of being weak for the gospel of Jesus Christ and this continues in history. Now I'm going to give four aspects of verse 24.

1. The reality of suffering. The reality of suffering.

2. The right attitude to suffering. Paul says, "I rejoice in my suffering." That's amazing. We are tested by this all the time, aren't we? It was very difficult to rejoice when our son Blake committed suicide. That was tough. I mean, that really discombobulated me. If I talk too long about him, I'll start crying so I don't want to go off too much on that. But I did cry every day for a year and a half, and it's such a mystery. Who can understand suicide? Who can really understand it? You know, I had to think a long time ago when God called me into missions and go to the Muslim world. I had to think, "Okay, go to the Muslim world. It's possible that a Muslim would kill me." I knew that a long time ago but I never expected my son who was 25 years old who was a dear, precious soul, to take his own life. And as I struggled with all that and meditated and cried, visited his grave many times, and I would just go, wow. You know, we're protected too much in our modern world from death, the reality of death, and visiting Blake's grave just to see it, just to see the dates there, see his name, and, you know, I would start talking to him and rebuke him

for doing that and then I'd go, "Lord, I know we can't talk to the dead." And then I would start praying and because I was in the Scriptures, I would have these thoughts that said, remember, because when someone dies and you visit their grave, there's nothing, you can't, there's nothing physical left except for that stone, and I had these thoughts of, you know, "Okay, God, where are you? I want to feel you. I want to see you." And the thought came, "No one can see me and live." Remember God said that to Moses, "You can't see me and live." But then the other thought came, Jesus Christ said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." So get deeper into the gospels and study the gospels and the Bible to see who God is. Jesus is, he came and he was the physical image and representation of who God is because he was God by nature and human by nature.

So where was I? The reality of suffering, number 1. The right attitude to the suffering, to accept it and rejoice, but also realize it's a process. 3. The relationship of suffering to evangelism and missions, and what does it mean filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. 4. The result and the means. The result of evangelism and missions and suffering as the church, and the church is made up of local churches all over. That was great that Ted chose that song, "We long to see your churches filled with the elect, the true believers." The relationship. The result. The relationship of suffering to evangelism and missions. The result of evangelism and missions and suffering is the church but also the church is the means of getting the gospel out.

Look over at Ephesians 3. This is my friend, David Meade, who was my boss for 11 years, this is his favorite verse. Ephesians 3:10, beginning in verse 8, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles," or to preach to the nations, the ethnic people groups. This is the Greek word "ethnikos, ethne," where we get our English word "ethnic" from. It does not mean a political boundary. It does not mean a country. It means a people group, some that are spread over political boundaries today and some, many, that are within a political boundary. India today has over 3,000 main ethnic people groups. You think about the Kurds of northern Iraq and western Iran and the tip of Syria and eastern Turkey. They don't have their own political boundary and nobody ever heard of them for years. I'm sorry, Americans did not know who the Kurds were for many years. I remember when I witnessed to other Muslims here in the states, the Kurds would say, this was before all the '90s and the Gulf War and stuff, the Kurds would say the world knows about the Palestinians but not about us, not about the Kurds.

Anyway, the ethnic people groups, the nations. To preach to the nations, "the unsearchable riches of Christ." God had brought many nations, many ethnicities into the Roman Empire of the Apostle Paul's day. Then look at verse 9 of Ephesians 3, "and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan," there is that word back in Colossians, the administration, the plan, the strategy, "of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." It is through the church that the gospel goes out. Churches send missionaries. Churches plant other churches. Churches commission people to go and be sent. And through the church, God rebukes the satanic powers in the heavenly places. He makes known the manifold wisdom of God, the

multi-layered wisdom of God which no human can comprehend. And through the church is God's strategy of rebuking Satan and demons and also of proclaiming his truth to the angels.

So the reality of suffering is all through the New Testament. I started going through the whole New Testament, every book of the New Testament has many verses about suffering or persecution or imprisonment. The Apostle Paul talks about it. Tribulations, and yeah, suffering, tribulation. Every book of the New Testament, the reality of suffering. The reality of suffering is really in two parts. One is what the Apostle Paul means here in Colossians 1 is suffering for the sake of the gospel, persecution, suffering for getting the word out, for reaching into new cultures. He was in prison here. These are known as the prison epistles: Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon. A lot of Philemon relates to Colossians. And he is in prison in Rome under house arrest. These four books, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians and Philemon, were written at the same time as the end of the book of Acts. This is a different prison time than the Apostle Paul was in 2 Timothy. So that's why the book of Acts ends so abruptly and we never hear, that's why we know it was written very early, like 61 or 62 A.D., because it stops and he's still there under house arrest. So during those two years, he wrote these four letters, the prison epistles.

Look at Colossians 4:3. He says this, that he is there in prison, Colossians 4:3, "At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison." Then look at the last verse, chapter 4, verse 18, "I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains." Remember my imprisonment. Remember my bonds. "Grace be with you."

I had the privilege of going to this area is in the area today called Turkey. Many of the places in the New Testament are in today what is called Turkey: Ephesus, the seven churches of Revelation, Colossae. We were there, Pastor John Crofts, and David Meade and I with a group of others, and I'll never forget seeing Laodicea. Laodicea is close by to Colossae and so is another city called Hierapolis. Hierapolis was famous in early church history and the Apostle Paul mentions those at the end of this book and he says in verse 13, chapter 4, verse 13, "For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you," talking about Epaphras, he's the one that spread the gospel to the Colossians in chapter 1, verses 5 and 6 and 7, you can see that, "and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis." And I got to go to Laodicea and Hierapolis and the tour guide said, because we asked about where's Colossae? And he said, "Well, it's up there at the top of the hill about 10 miles but there's hardly anything there, so it's not really worth it," because there was a lot more ruins and stones and ancient buildings left from the site at Hierapolis and Laodicea.

And look at verse 16, "And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea." What's the letter from Laodicea? More than likely it's the epistle of Ephesians because in the most ancient manuscripts of Ephesians that we have, it's not "in Ephesus" is not there and there is a blank space. It was a circular letter that the Apostle Paul wrote so that it would go to many different churches. That's why many of the content in Ephesians and

Colossians is similar, and sometimes you need Ephesians in order to understand what he's talking about in Colossians.

When we lived in Turkey, we were there almost 3 years and the Lord had worked that we had to learn a little Turkish to get around and talk to taxi drivers and buy food. It's a totally different language than Farsi. But our purpose there on the church planting team was to learn Farsi or Persian, the language of Iran. And we had to come home because we didn't know what was wrong with Blake. He wasn't talking. He was three years old and it was weird, the grunts that he made, the sounds that he made, not even dada or mama, no, nothing. And so we were having him tested through the experts and I'll never forget on Halloween night, we were at another church, they had a substitute for Halloween, a spiritual presentation and some kind of party, get-together, lots of food and snacks and fellowship by one of the churches that supported us. And we didn't get home until one in the morning and I got a call from Richard Corley who is, he was our mentor, Richard and Doreen Corley. They lived in Iran for 25 years, from 1955 to 1980, and then they kept on ministering to Iranians when they had to leave in 1980. The Ayatollah Khomeini told them once they discovered they were there, he said, you have 24 hours to get out. This was back in 1980. They actually stayed after they told them to get out and Mr. Corley made friends with the local police and he was friends with his neighbors there. He learned the culture and the people. Even his personality was more Iranian. When he would speak in English, it would be really different, it would be like Iranian style. When he would call me, he would go, "Brother, are you happy?" And I said, "We never say that when we call somebody." That's what the Iranians say, "Hello or peace. Are you happy?" And he was a wonderful joy. He just passed away a few months ago. He was 89 years old. They labored for many years in Iran and Turkey among Iranians. They taught us to learn the language and be with the people and love people and preach the gospel. They were our mentors.

Well, when he called me while we were home, he said the American consulate in Istanbul called me in and said, "Don't ask us how we know but we know there's a group after you. They're either going to make you disappear or kill you." And they said, "Don't even go back to your house. Get someone else to get your stuff. Go to a different city and then consider leaving Turkey." And so he told me that has happened and he said, "I'm calling from a different city and I want to turn the work over to you." And I was like, "Whoa, no way!" I mean, we have just learned the language and even then after 2 1/2 years, almost 3 years, you still don't feel like you know it that well. And it was a death of a vision for me to wrestle with that because eventually Connie and I decided we should come home and stay home for Blake's sake so we could figure out what his speech impediment was. We didn't even know that was it.

Anyway, so I had to go back after I heard that. I went back to Turkey for three weeks in December 1995, and it was really spooky. I was all by myself and I was selling all our stuff, and I got to baptize three people from one family, but we decided to do a secret baptism. And there were these giant iron tubs, I don't know the right word, not tub but this giant iron container, like a little pool but it was hard iron. And I can't remember how we moved it. Oh, we couldn't move it, it was so heavy and so I had to take a hose from

the church courtyard, this was one of the few churches that the Turks allowed in the whole country. The ethnic people group, the Armenians met there in the morning, and we met there in the afternoon and the evenings before the Iranian church in their own language. So I had to bring the hose out, hook it up and put it through a window in order to fill it up for the baptism.

So I was doing that and my mind was going everywhere, I was thinking about, you know, these people are after you and where is Mr. Corley? I was all by myself and suddenly there are two Iranians that show up and they look at me and they say, "Where is Mr. Corley?" And I went, "Uh-oh, here they are. They're looking for Mr. Corley." And so I tried to hold myself together and I went, "Well, he's not here," which was true, "and he left," which was true. And they looked at me and they said, "Yeah, we can tell you're struggling." One of them said, "I'm Hyke's brother." Hyke is one of the other Iranian pastors that was killed in 1994. When we were there, he came to preach for us from Iran and about four months later after he went back to Iran, they killed him. He said, "I'm Hyke's brother." And on the inside I was going, "Yeah, sure." And then he goes, then he looks at me and he goes, "I have a picture and here, here's the picture." And there was a picture of Hyke and him, and I went, "Oh, praise God." They came, the two, they were two brothers from the believers in Iran and they came to our secret baptism.

They had about 10 there and the Lord gave me that privilege but every night I heard so many noises, I thought, "This is it." I thought, "Okay." And so many different times I thought, "Okay, this is it," but I don't have time to tell you about the other ones. Suffering is a reality and we have to not let fear keep us from moving forward. You have to not let fear keep you from carrying on. Remember Pastor Ty's sermons where he said, "Keep calm and carry on." The part of "carry on" is much more than worship, obedience, sanctification, separation from the world. It also includes evangelism and missions and suffering. You know, when you read Ezra/Nehemiah, the separation from unbelievers comes out really clear but the New Testament says separate your thinking and your mind from the thinking of the culture and the world and the philosophies of this world, but the emphasis in the New Testament is not separate from people. Now obviously if somebody was an alcoholic and they get saved and they need to separate and not hang out with their old friends who are going to tempt them into sin. That's the whole point of the biblical idea of separation is to separate yourself from ungodliness and sin so that you can walk with the Lord and glorify him. But remember Jesus said, "I do not ask that you take them out of the world but to keep them from the evil one," John 17:15.

The reality of suffering. Look at 2 Corinthians 11 beginning in verse 23, "Are they servants of Christ?" He's talking about these false teachers. "I am a better one--I am talking like a madman," to say "I'm better," he says that's foolishness, that's madness, "with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles," the nations, the non-Jews, "danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and

hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?" Verse 30, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."

This is God's strategy for spreading his message, the message of Jesus Christ "who while reviled, he did not revile in return, while suffering he uttered no threats," 1 Peter 2:21, and there Peter says, "you were called for this purpose, that you follow in his footsteps." Called for what purpose? To suffer for doing right. For suffering for the gospel. He says, "What credit is it to you if you sin and suffer for it? That's nothing. Everybody has that. But if you do right and suffer for it, this finds favor with God." Have you ever thought about the fact that many atheists and secularists and unbelievers in the Western world, they've never seen our godly response like Jesus to suffering, or they don't see it very often. Jesus didn't go, like there was a song that came out in the late '70s, "Go ahead, drive the nails," I'm adding to it here, "Go ahead, drive the nails in my hand. I'll rise again." Jesus didn't do that. Jesus did not say to the Romans who were crucifying him, he didn't say, "Go ahead. I'm going to rise. I'm going to show you." He was like a lamb that went to the slaughter, that's what 1 Peter 2:20-25 say.

The reality of suffering. The Apostle Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:12, "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." The whole book of 1 Peter is about suffering and persecution and he constantly says, "Don't be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you. If you suffer as a Christian, rejoice." And then in chapter 4, verse 19 of 1 Peter, he says, "let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."

The reality of suffering and Paul gives us, number 2, the right attitude toward suffering. He says, "I rejoice." Other places, the whole book of Philippians is, "Rejoice because God is using my imprisonment to spread the gospel. People from the Roman guard are getting saved. God is using this for his glory and the spread of the gospel. Rejoice." It is difficult. I'm not saying it's easy. I've had a hard time. There's other kinds of suffering too just because we live in a fallen world, like economic suffering and poverty and wars and suicide, depression. You know, we're all in a fallen world but Romans 8:18 says, "the sufferings of this life are not compared to the glory that will be revealed to us," Romans 8:18 and following. He talks about how all creation is groaning, longing for the revealing, the second coming of Christ and the revealing of the sons of God. That's why that song we sang fit really well. Creation is groaning and one day after the second coming and the judgment, there will be a new heavens and a new earth, and that's what he means here in Colossians 1 when he talks about God is reconciling all things to himself.

He doesn't mean unbelievers. Look at chapter 3, verse 6. He talks about a list of sins in verse 5 where he says, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality," that's the Greek word "porneia" where we get "pornography." Porneia plus graphics, writings and pictures. In those days, it meant trafficking with prostitutes, sex before marriage, fornication is the old word that we had in English. Put these all aside, "sexual

immorality," fornication, "impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming."

So when he says back in chapter 1 where he says in verse 18, "he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Making peace by the blood of his cross. That shows the power of the atonement, the worthiness of the atonement which shows that that's not what he means in verse 24 where he says, "I fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." But when he says he's reconciling all things, he doesn't mean everyone is going to be saved. He means that there's going to be some people from all nations that are going to be saved, just like Revelation 5:9 says, some from every people and tribe and nation and tongue or language, are redeemed, are purchased, are bought, past tense, by the blood of the Lamb. But he also means that there's going to be a new creation, there's going to be a new heavens and a new earth, so that's what he means by the reconciliation.

2 Peter tells us this earth is going to be destroyed one day and it's going to melt with fire. Look over there, 2 Peter 3, and this is the relationship of suffering through the spread of the gospel. Have you ever thought about why does time continue? 2 Peter 3, the whole context is about the coming of Christ, the coming day of God, the second coming of Christ, and the scoffers, the mockers, the unbelievers say, "Where is the promise of his coming?" in verse 4, and he goes on and he says, verse 8, "do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day," meaning God is over time and God is controlling time. Don't try to figure out when Christ is going to return or when the rapture is going to happen. There are so many verses that say stop doing that. "Of that day no one knows," Matthew 24, I think it's verse 36. Acts 1, Peter and the apostles said, "Okay, Lord, you've risen from the dead." The idea behind it is, "Are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel? Are you now going to take up the sword and get these Romans off our back?" Acts 1:6-8. And Jesus says, "No, it's not for you to know the times or the seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But," what, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you shall be my witnesses. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth."

Why does time continue? He says here in 2 Peter 3, this is how it helps us understand what verse 9 says. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you." He is saying he's patient toward the church to get out and witness because that's why he hasn't returned yet. "Not willing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance." He doesn't mean every single individual obviously, he means everyone who is going to believe through the church. Because later he says, "What kind of people ought you to be but holy and godly," and then he says one more thing, "hastening the day of God," and then in verse 15 he says something really interesting, "count the patience of our Lord as salvation," count it, reckon it, realize it, that the reason why Christ has not returned is because he's patient with the church to get on with keep calm and carry on, and carry on evangelism, missions, being weak, suffering for the sake

of the gospel, and living it out in front of unbelievers so that some of these unbelievers will go, "Whoa, there is no way humanly possible a human can do that!"

When you look at the amazing things in the Scriptures, the suffering that Jesus and the apostles went through, the suffering of the first three centuries of the early church, it's amazing. So thirdly, the relationship of suffering through the spread of the gospel. Go back to Colossians. I'm not really good at being organized and Connie was praying for me and I was praying, "Lord, help me because I'm so full of, my brain is just firing off everywhere," and I hope that this is clear as far as being organized.

Verse 23 before verse 24, he says this message of the hope of the gospel "has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister." That does not mean that the gospel was proclaimed to every nation, every creature in all creation. It's a hyperbole. It's an exaggeration where the inspired apostle knows the truth of the gospel is so sure and God's sovereignty is so sure, he knows the strategy and the plan of God, and we'll see that in a minute, that it is like it's already been done. When we go and share the gospel and suffer and be patient and realize God doesn't need us but we have the privilege of doing this... I forgot what I was going to say there. What am I talking about here?

Verse 23 and then verse 25 and 26 where he says, "for the sake of his body, the church," verse 25, "of which I became a minister according to the" plan, there's that word again, "the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known," or to fulfill the word of God because really what it says literally, to fulfill the word of God, "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

What does he mean by "to fulfill the word of God"? Look at Isaiah, go back to Isaiah 52. The end of Isaiah 52 is really a part of Isaiah 53. I don't know why they, whoever decided to divide the chapters where they did. You know, for centuries there was no verse numbers or chapters. For centuries it was all crammed together. Well, really, Isaiah 53 which every line is either quoted or alluded to in the New Testament and also these last three verses of chapter 52. Verse 13, "Behold, my servant shall act wisely," or succeed. He will act wisely so as to accomplish the goal of his mission. When Isaiah says constantly "my servant," this is what Jesus was alluding to when he said, "I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life a ransom for many," Mark 10:45, repeated in Matthew. My servant will act wisely, accomplish the mission, it's all in that one word. "He shall be high and lifted up, and greatly exalted." There's the resurrection, the ascension and the session of the suffering servant, the Messiah at the right hand of the Father.

Skip down to the last verse, verse 15, "he will sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for what they had not been told they will see, and what they have not heard they will understand." There it is. The mission of the suffering servant, the Messiah and his atonement, his resurrection, is not yet complete until those

who've never heard hear. Wow. That's what Paul's referring to. He knows the Scriptures and that's why he calls it the fulfilling of the word of God by preaching to the Gentiles, and this purpose of God is still going on today through the church.

So the fourth point, in fact, this, sorry I forgot, this last part of verse 15 is quoted, Isaiah 52:15, is quoted in Romans 15:20-21 where the Apostle Paul says, "I have always had as my ambition to preach the gospel not where Christ is already known so that I won't build upon another man's foundation." Then he quotes this, "as it is written," for as it is written, "They who have not heard shall hear and they who have not known shall see." The strategy of God, of spreading the gospel, the great plan of spreading the gospel in this world and in history is through suffering and churches and weakness, being weak.

The result is churches and it means local churches and also the universal church. He says here "the church," and we don't have time but if you read through the book of Ephesians, you can see that when he talks about the church in the book of Ephesians, it's a very cosmic large idea, meaning all the believers of all time. We'd better look at one of them which is really interesting and really good for Evangelical Protestants to see. Colossians 3:20-21, sorry, Ephesians 3:20-21, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever." This shows that the church did not blink off after the apostles finished writing the Scriptures. The church did not blink off in 325 AD with the Council of Nicea. The church did not blink off in the Middle Ages, even though it had a lot of corruption in it. It was not totally gone or apostate.

Many people who would believe in the teachings of the Reformation, many modern Christians don't realize that before that time it was not like the church was totally gone. It was there through every generation. The key to understanding it is once Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and others got healthy churches started, the Council of Trent in 1545 to 1563, that's when they anathematized, they condemned justification by faith alone, that's when the Roman Catholic Church became a false church and a false religion. Before, it was the only thing there in the West. Same thing with the Eastern Orthodox church. There are remnants of truth within them but they've gone off into externalism and legalism and false doctrines, adding the traditions of men to the Scriptures, to the doctrine, to the true doctrine.

So the result of suffering in preaching the gospel are local churches. Look back at Colossians 1:2, he says, "To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae." Then in chapter 4, verses 13 to 18, which we did look at, but one of the verses that's really interesting, he says, verse 15, chapter 4, verse 15, "Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house." So the church that Paul says I suffer for, is made up of churches, local churches, and that's very clear, and most of the time the word is used about local churches but many times in especially the book of Ephesians, he's talking about the universal body of Christ, of all the believers that's spreading out into all the world.

Look at chapter 3, verse 11. When he says put on the new self, "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." That is a key verse that I've been thinking about a lot in light of the social justice movement, in light of the critical race theory, in light of the philosophy of our culture that's really taking over these days. But I always wondered what does this mean, Christ is all? I get the second part where he says, "and in all." It doesn't mean he's in every individual, he means in the church, if you're a true believer, he's in all kinds of people, Jews and Greeks and Romans and other Gentiles, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian. The Scythians were the most barbaric group in the Roman-Greek idea of those days from what today would be central Asia and the Ukraine. Slave and free. Christ comes into our economic and social class and frees us.

Christ is all. There's two ways we can take that. One is that when we're together and there's other nations and other ethnicities and we learn to love people from other cultures, we are testifying, we are demonstrating Christ to the world. That's why God deliberately did what he did at the tower of Babel. He deliberately made languages, cultures, ethnicities. I was so blessed listening to Pastor Ty's sermons from Genesis 10 and 11. God deliberately made all those peoples according to their languages and their cultures and their lands, their families, their clans, their ethnicities, and he says it three times, he repeats that, the son, the descendants of Shem, Ham and Japheth. And then later in chapter 12 where God chooses Abram and he says, "Get up from your family and your comfort zone and your house and go to the land that I will show you. Get up from Ur of the Chaldees," which is over near Southern Iraq and where Kuwait is today, about that area, "Get up and go to the land that I will show you and I will make you a great nation and you are going to be a blessing to all the nations."

The strategy of God was to raise up Israel as his missionary people. The rest of the Bible is the unfolding of that, the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12, and God deliberately made languages and cultures and differences to test our innate selfishness, our innate prejudice, our innate, "We don't like that and we don't like that food, and we don't like those people. I can't handle that. That's too strange." God deliberately did that and then he kept telling Israel, "Proclaim my glory to the nations," several time in the Psalms. He told them in Exodus 12, "You're a kingdom of priests among all the nations. You're supposed to tell the nations who the true God is." In Isaiah 49:6, he said, "It's too small a thing to raise up the tribes of Jacob, return you from Babylonian captivity. I will also make you a light to the nations."

This is God's great strategy and plan is through evangelism, discipleship, the planting of churches, suffering and being weak. I want to close with a story from Adoniram Judson. Oh, I forgot. The other way that this Christ is all, he's saying Christ is our all-sufficiency. Christ is all we need to overcome sin, which we talked about earlier, to overcome ethnic divisions. When he says Christ is all, he's saying your identity whether Jew or Gentile or Greek or slave or uncircumcised or circumcised, your real identity is in Christ, not in your ethnicity. That takes precedence over your culture and ethnicity but at the same time, God does not ignore that. He has created different peoples and cultures and

ethnicity, and when we learn to love one another, we demonstrate the power of the gospel, the power of Christ.

Christ is our all-sufficiency and fullness. He is looking back at chapter 1 and 2. He says if you're a believer, you're complete in Christ. And I like what Augustine said, "All in all is the fulfillment of all our ultimate desires." And in Ephesians he says the church of the fullness of Christ is the church that is in all in all. What does he mean? In all kinds of people, in all kinds of places. Ephesians 1. He gave, he put all things under his feet, verse 22, and gave him as head over all things to the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all kinds of people in all kinds of places, or all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances.

He is the ultimate, Christ is our ultimate all in all and this was a big test for me. I read a biography of Adoniram Judson. Adoniram and Ann or Nancy Judson, they were the first American Baptists that along with Luther Rice founded the first American mission agency. William Carey, who went from England, was the first mission agency founded by English or British Baptists and they were all Reformed, they were all Calvinistic, and their Calvinism, their faith in God's sovereignty, that he is going to convert some when we preach the gospel, motivated them and moved them out to go to the unreached.

Adoniram and Ann Judson went to Burma, which is now called Myanmar, and all three of their children died. Later he remarried but that would take up too much time to go through all this. Here's what she said when their second child died. She said, "Our hearts were bound up with this child. We felt he was our earthly all." I read that and I went, "Wow, she's referring to Colossians 3, Christ is our all." She said, "We felt he was our earthly all, our only source of innocent recreation in this heathen land, but God saw it necessary to remind us of our error and to strip us of our only little all." Wow. That's the big lesson that Connie and I have been learning. Losing Blake was like our earthly all, our blessing. All of our children are a blessing but taking him away has been a big lesson. And then she says, "Oh, may it not be in vain that he has done it. May we so improve it so that he will stay his hand and say it is enough." This is quoted in John Piper's book on page 88, "Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ." And I recommend that book to you along with a few others by way of application. Give your children a vision for mission.

I made the mistake of not wanting to be too extreme, because I am extreme. Everybody that knows me knows I'm an extreme person and I'm all over the place and I'm kind of quirky, and things that excite me are not the normal things that excite everyday people in everyday life. I get bored when things are shallow or things don't mean much and that's a problem for me because those things also are a part of life and God has created other things. Anyway, I'm going too long, I know.

Give your children a vision for mission. There's four books that I would recommend. "The Great Omission," by Robertson McQuilkin. What is lacking? Remember Pastor Ty said when he was in Nehemiah, he said there's something lacking, the fear of God, the fear of the Lord. I remember that. Also another really good book, Ruth Tucker wrote a book called "From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya," which is the whole history of missions

through a paragraph or two, or maybe a page of the major missionaries in history. A great book, "From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya," by Ruth Tucker. And thirdly, "Let the Nations Be Glad," by John Piper. And fourthly, "Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ," by John Piper and he goes through the life of William Tyndale who was the first person to translate the New Testament from the Greek New Testament that Luther did earlier into German, William Tyndale was the first one to do that from Greek into English. John Wycliffe 100 years earlier was the first to translate the Bible into English but he did it from the Latin. He did not have Greek manuscripts to look at. What a great story to read about the life of Tyndale and John Patton and Adoniram Judson.

Christ is our all. I'll never forget in 1989 the Iranian government executed Hossein Soodmand because he was a Christian and he had become a pastor and he was sharing the gospel with Muslims there in Iran. They executed him in 1989 and a few years later, I think it was 2010 or 2012, I heard one of my students, they all came from this guy's city, the same city, years later after I taught and we were drinking tea and coffee after lunch, he said, "We are the fruit of Hossein Soodmand's execution. We are the fruit of that." Because when somebody's executed and they stand for Christ and they don't deny him, it's a powerful witness to others. It's such a powerful witness to others and what a great privilege it has been for us to meet people who have suffered in their country in Iran. I remember one lady, her and her husband were in prison and she would take her hand cream underneath the bunk that they had for them, and she would write scriptural phrases just to encourage her heart and the hand cream, the oil, would stay on the wall and the guards never saw it.

Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. Thank you that you are true, that the gospel is true. The word of truth came to Colossae, the gospel, the word of truth. And we have to realize that we will never understand the good news until we understand the bad news, the truth about sin, the truth about our hearts. Jesus, you said out of the heart flows lust and pornography and lusting and sexual immorality, and murders and pride in Mark 7, pride and selfishness and foolishness, greed and anger. Sin flows out of the heart. Lord, maybe somebody is here today and they thought, "Man, that's all about being a missionary and stuff and that's doesn't relate to me." But maybe you need to realize your sin, you need to repent and trust in Christ, repent and believe is what Mark 1:15 says. Thank you, Lord, that the word of truth, the gospel, went to Colossae and we can read this letter today. So I pray that you will awaken hearts of those that don't know you if there are any here. Most of the people here are probably believers. I pray that you will encourage them to not be afraid to share their faith and to realize it is through weakness that we are strong, that we have the power to witness to people in love with the right reaction to the society that is coming against us. When we see pastors being arrested recently, we think, "Wow, that's amazing that it's happening in the Western world, to the Judeo-Christian Western world," and yet by their testimony of weakness, there's going to be people that get amazed at that and be saved. So we pray you'll help us to realize keep calm and carry on. Part of carrying on is evangelism, discipleship and missions to unbelievers, to people that we don't naturally like to hang around or get to know. Help us, Lord, to have that

separation in our mind of holy thinking, of not being conformed to the thinking of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. But help us to also realize your grand strategy of spreading the gospel is through suffering and weakness and churches. In Jesus' name. Amen.