

**Colossians: The Supremes Part 3**  
**Colossians 1:24-29**  
**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on May 28, 2023**

*The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the Word of God...and for this cause, Jesus Christ left other works and occupied himself mostly in preaching, and this did his apostles. – John Wycliffe<sup>1</sup>*

**The High Calling of the Preaching the Gospel**

Not too long ago, a popular theologian had transitioned from his pastorate to a teaching position at a ministry training center. Once, a student asked him a question about his previous occupation as a pastor. “What was it like for you when you were just a minister?” The pastor-turned-professor replied, “What do you mean, *just* a minister? Don’t you realize that the pulpit is the highest calling on earth? God had only one Son and He made Him a preacher!”<sup>2</sup>

The professor was serious about the point he was making. Christian ministry is the highest calling. Many throughout the history of the Church had agreed. From Wycliffe to Luther, from Augustine to Anselm, from Aquinas to Tozer, many have agreed with the uniqueness of this calling.

In the last century, Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte wrote a letter of encouragement to a discouraged pastor friend: “The angels around the throne envy your great work...Go on and grow in grace and power as a gospel preacher!”<sup>3</sup> More recently, W. E. Sangster of the Westminster Hall in London said: “Called to preach...commissioned of God to teach the word! A herald of the great King! A witness of the Eternal Gospel! Could any work be more high and holy! To this supreme task God sent his only begotten Son. In all the frustration and confusion of the times, is it possible to imagine a work comparable in importance with the proclaiming the will of God to wayward men?”<sup>4</sup>

We are all called to many different occupations and if you are following God’s will for your life in that occupation, than you are fulfilling a holy calling. However, the gospel ministry in its various forms is the highest call possible.

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Tabletalk*, 9, no.2 (April 1985), p.12

<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *Walking with the Giants*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), p.269

<sup>4</sup> Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 43.

In Colossians 1, Paul has introduced us to a succession of the supremacy of Christ in creation (1:15-17), in the Church (v.18), and in reconciliation (19-23). Now, Paul gives us a supremely magnificent perspective on his resulting ministry. It is a balanced view that details four aspects of his own ministry: his ministerial *attitude*, his ministerial *charge*, his ministerial *purpose*, and his ministerial *devotion*. Now for those who are called to vocational ministry, Paul's words are exceedingly helpful. But for those who have not been called to vocational ministry, this text is still extremely helpful. For every serious believer in Christ is called to the "ministry of the gospel," regardless of whatever it is you do professionally. I invite you to read with me Paul's writing in Colossians 1:24-29. (read text)

### **Paul's Ministerial Attitude**

Paul explicitly said that he rejoiced in his sufferings. He did not hint about it. He did not imply that was true. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings." Someone outside the church looking in may find such a statement incomprehensible. They cannot comprehend how a person would rejoice in suffering, especially in physical pain.

Growing up, coaches would always parrot the same phrase: "No pain, no gain." However, for those of us running until we regurgitated, our belief was, "No pain...NO PAIN!!!!" And yet, the Apostle Paul writes often about rejoicing in suffering. He speaks of exulting in tribulation in Romans 5:3. Peter agrees with Paul when he says to suffer and rejoice in 1 Peter 4:13. Acts 5:41 tells of the apostles rejoicing that they had been counted "worthy" to suffer. Paul rejoiced too. But why?

First, because his suffering brought good to the Church. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings to you, and I completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for his body, that is, the church." (v.24) The Church benefitted significantly from Paul's suffering.

Paul writes to the Corinthian church that he had suffered far more pain and suffering than other church leaders who brag about what they have endured. Paul writes that he had far more pain, many more imprisonments, far worse beatings, many of those brought him near death.

Five times Paul was whipped thirty-nine times. Three times he was beaten with rods. He was stoned once. Three times a boat he was sailing on was shipwrecked. He spent a day and night on the open sea.

Because of his constant traveling, Paul faced dangers crossing rivers and faced the danger of robbers on the open roads. Both Jews and Gentiles alike posed a threat to Paul and those dangers came regardless of where he was: in cities or in the country; on dry land or on the open sea. Paul also faced a unique danger that most of those called to gospel ministry have faced: false brothers and sisters. These are people who claim to be Christians but behave duplicitously, undermining his teaching and authority.

Paul worked and toiled, experiencing several sleepless nights, extreme hunger and thirst. He was often without basic necessities like food and adequate clothing, forced to deal with the cold. That is a massive list of the intense persecution he faced outside the Church. It was in this context that Paul conducted his ministry – with all of that outside persecution and pushback against him, personally.

On top of that list of persecution came an immense pressure of his daily concern for his churches. Despite not being present with each church plant, Paul was still weakened by their weakness. He was angered when churches were forced to stumble in some way. Paul had these external persecutions and these immense internal pressures. And he rejoices with all of them. Because all of these miseries and stresses meant that the gospel was brought to Asia and Europe. Had Paul not made these journeys, he would not have suffered.

Paul's suffering was a reminder to Paul that he was doing God's work in planting churches like the one in Colossae. So, despite the problems, he rejoices. You see, Paul understood how this worked. He had skin in the game. He was blessing the church by suffering for its expansion.

Paul's words encourage us as we realize difficulties come with the territory in ministry and each pushback, each insult, is a source of joy as we realize the work we are doing. But what about you? Do you rejoice in the struggle of ministry?

Are you so deeply engaged and invested in the church that you feel that same weight as Paul did in ministry as you prepare to teach, to help, to serve? If you never stepped foot inside a church again, what ministry would have to adjust to fill your spot? Would you leave a gap that would be required to be filled? I think many people find ways to not serve the church so they don't feel bad when they don't go.

Paul understood this truth: the gospel spreads through missional and ministerial hardship. But further, Paul knew something far more subtle: Christians grow through their personal suffering. One time, I was complaining to one of my mentors named Joe using the expanded vocabulary of the 20-something minister. I told Joe, “Sometimes there is just so much crap coming at me.” Joe’s wise reply: “Ah but Craig, crap makes things grow.”

Believers grow from their personal suffering and the good that they receive from pain flows out to others. In this way, even our struggles edify and encourage the church. Serving the church is not easy. Because the church is full of people and people are complex and difficult. But working through pain and pressure brings good to God and to His people. And we rejoice in that. Everyone benefits from this struggle and Paul rejoices in that.

Secondly, Paul described his suffering as “completing...what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” This is a challenging verse, one of the most debated in Scripture. We know it does *not* mean that Paul made up that which was lacking in the atoning sufferings of Christ, for the whole of Colossians (as well as the entire New Testament) teaches the sufficiency of Christ in atonement (2:13, 14; 1:12-14, 19-22). Paul did not help with the atonement. That was something Jesus took care of by himself.

But one thing the phrase teaches is that a close identification develops between Christ and the Church through suffering. Do you remember the question Jesus asked Paul when he was still Saul and was on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians there? “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4) At the time, Saul was making Christ suffer in the people that Saul was persecuting. Jesus was being persecuted *in the bodies of his followers*. However, not long after Saul’s conversion, Jesus said, “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16). Paul did suffer, and Christ would suffer in him – a powerful truth revealed here.

Paul experienced a sense of sublime unity with Christ as he sensed that, in his sufferings, Jesus participated with Paul in those pains. Jesus identifies with His people. Our sufferings become his sufferings. He shares in our pain. Sufferings bring a special closeness with Jesus. That verse is a powerful mind-correction for many Christians who are convinced that Jesus abandoned them in their pain. It is the opposite of that which is true!

Our sufferings provide a unique and special closeness with Christ. Every lash or rod or rock that Paul felt fell also on Christ in Paul, binding Paul and the Lord closer together in that mutual suffering.

Want another example of how this happens? In Daniel 3, three Hebrews are thrown into a massive area of hot, constantly burning fire where garbage, refuse and other unwanted things (and people) are disposed of. It was so intense that even the muscled-up soldiers who shoved these three into the “furnace” died from the heat. But Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were joined by a fourth person in the fire: the Lord (Daniel 3:25).

This is why Paul can pray from a Roman jail: “I want to know him and the power of his resurrection, and...share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. (Philippians 3:10)

Paul understood full well that suffering is miserable. But the sense of unity with Christ that comes from suffering is wonderful.

### **Paul’s Ministerial Charge**

Next, we read about Paul’s charge for his gospel ministry in v. 25. Preaching is the main function of his charge, specifically Biblical exposition. “To make the word of God fully known” literally reads “that I might complete the Word of God.” The idea communicated here is to lay out the Bible fully and completely. People cannot know Christ better without knowing the Scriptures.

Paul’s main charge was not “inspiring the flock.” It wasn’t “mobilizing the Army of God.” It was not “showing and sharing a purpose-filled life.” Exposition of the Scriptures through preaching was the heart of God’s call to Paul.

Preaching, and teaching, must open the Word of God. Paul shares the specifics of this preaching in 26-27. Paul’s preaching set forth a “mystery” – namely, that in some way, God’s saving purpose was going to be extended to Gentiles. This would mean both Jews and non-Jews sitting together in faith. Paul taught that Jesus tore down any dividing wall between the groups so that both sides could enjoy *shalom*, peace, together. This is a miracle that had occurred in Colossae because of the presence of Jesus. The complete word of God, taught and preached, with a gospel-driven purpose, brings people who are different from each other together.

### **Paul's Ministerial Purpose**

We see the purpose or goal revealed in v.28. Paul wants to one day present complete, mature, full-grown Christians to Christ. Paul wanted to preach and teach the Word, equipping people to be able to one day stand before God as fully devoted followers of Jesus. His method of bringing believers to maturity was through proclamation, warning, and teaching.

He proclaimed Christ and that was the beginning and the end of his message. I agree with George Whitfield's take on this. There are plenty of other men who may preach the gospel better than I ever will. But nobody can preach a better gospel than the one that I preach. Because we preach Christ. Preaching Christ changes lives.

When lives were changed by Christ, Paul would then "warn everyone" – which meant correcting and admonishing them. Admonishment is hard. But it was required, and Paul understood that.

Paul also spent time "teaching everyone." Paul proclaimed Christ and warned and taught everyone because he truly believed Christ was for everyone.

### **Paul's Ministerial Devotion**

"I labor for this, striving with his strength that works powerfully in me." Nobody can have a genuine, authentic, biblical ministry without hard work. The Greek word we translate as labor or toil was used for work that left one so weary it was as if the person had taken a beating. It denotes labor to the point of exhaustion. The word we translate as "striving" is the word from which we get our English word *agony*. These words used together describe the tremendous sense of devotion that motivated Paul's ministry. Paul was straining in his physical person to present people as complete in Christ.

Paul worked hard and that should be our model as well. We will never have authentic, apostolic ministries unless we are willing to work to the point of exhaustion. I once saw the late Christian performer Rich Mullins in concert and something he said in that concert will always resonate within my heart and mind. He mentioned how people would comment that he looked tired all the time. His reply: "This is how we are supposed to look. We are called to be drink offerings, pouring our lives out. This is what pouring out looks like." Rich was right. Pouring out has bags under the eyes. Pouring out

means aches and pains. Pouring out wears you down and presses you down. It's what genuine ministry is. And it is wonderful. And despite how we look, we're constantly refreshed in Him.

Many years ago, a woman in Africa became a Christian. Being filled with gratitude, she decided to do something for Christ. She was almost blind, uneducated, and seventy years old. She came to her missionary with her French Bible and asked her to underline John 3:16 in red ink. Mystified, the missionary watched her as she took her Bible and sat in front of a boys' school in the afternoon. When school dismissed, she would call a boy or two and ask them if they knew French. When they proudly responded that they did, she would say, "Please read the passage underlined in red." When they did, she would ask, "Do you know what this means?" And she would tell them about Jesus. The missionary says that over the years, twenty-four young men became pastors due to her work.<sup>5</sup>

We are all called to ministry like this. We must have the attitude of unity in Christ; the charge to be devoted to the Scriptures first and foremost; the purpose of presenting fully devoted followers of Christ to Jesus; and a devotion to press beyond exhaustion and pain until the ministry is complete.

This is not just a call for professional ministers. This is a call for all of us.

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<sup>5</sup> Maxine Dunnan, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, The Communicator's Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), pp.363-364.

## **FURTHER THOUGHTS**

Think about some of the hardest manual labor you have ever participated in. What was it? What were you doing? How did you feel once it was completed?

Have you ever heard the phrase, “When all is said and done, there is more said than done?” Is that how working for the Lord should be?

Martin Luther’s biographers write that often, he worked himself so hard that he would collapse into bed each night. Moody’s bedtime prayer on one occasion, as he rolled his body into his bed, was, “Lord, I’m tired! Amen.” John Wesley rode sixty to seventy miles many days of his life and preached an average of three sermons a day, whether he was riding or not. Alexander Maclaren would get to his office when the workmen went to work so he could hear their boots outside and would put on workmen’s boots to remind him of why he was in his study. Paul’s ministerial passion should motivate us too. Have you ever collapsed into bed after a long, full day of work? What was that like? Have you ever collapsed into bed after a full day of serving the Lord?

In what ways are you “pouring your life out” for the Lord and His Bride, the Church?



## **ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

**Wednesday Bible Study: 10:30AM – The Book of Mark.** We will finish up chapter 8 this week and then take a break from the Bible study in June and July. We will reconvene in August.

**Silver Wings Trip:** Silver Wings Ministry is going to see *Hello Dolly* on Friday, July 21<sup>st</sup> at 2:30PM. The cost is \$38 per ticket, and this needs to be paid to the church office by Wednesday May 31<sup>st</sup>. They will carpool and leave the church parking lot at 11:30AM and enjoy lunch together before the show begins.

**VBS DONATION BOARDS:** There are still around 20 items to be picked up for donation for Vacation Bible School. Would you consider taking one or two of those so we can have each item spoken for? Thank you in advance for your generosity!

**VBS DECORATION PARTY! SUNDAY JUNE 4<sup>th</sup> at 12:30PM.** Next Sunday, we will be decorating the church for Vacation Bible School. We need several hands to help get this done in a timely manner. Lunch will be provided! If you are interested, please see Pastor Jason Dubea and let him know!

**VACATION BIBLE SCHOOL: JUNE 19-23 – 6-8:30PM** This is for all children Pre-K through completed 5<sup>th</sup> Grade. We still need volunteers, and we will also need donations for snacks, volunteer suppers, crafts, and decorations. Donation boards are out now. If you have questions, ask Pastor Craig for more info.

**YOUTH FUNDRAISER SHIRTS AND EARRINGS AVAILABLE:** In the welcome center there are five designs for t-shirts and five different earring options. Go see what is there and help support our teenagers as they raise funds for camp this summer!

### **SUMMER WORSHIP SCHEDULE BEGINNING NEXT SUNDAY THROUGH AUGUST 13:**

**9:30 - BIBLICAL COMMUNITY BIBLE STUDY/SUNDAY SCHOOL HOUR**

**11:00 – JOINT WORSHIP SERVICE**

During the summer months, we shift the schedule to ease the volunteer burden for the worship service hours, particularly in the Children's Church ministry. This allows a break and to stretch the volunteer pool a bit during June, July, and early August while so many are in and out for vacation. During these weeks, we will NOT offer worship at 9AM. We will adjust the Biblical Community hour to begin at 9:30AM to allow for more time to pass between Bible Study and worship.