

Suffering for Ministry **Colossians 1:24-2:5**

Well, last week we returned to our sermon series through 1 Peter and we finished chapter 3, which means we should be starting chapter 4, however, we are going to take a one week detour out of 1 Peter this morning.

This morning, I want us to look at a passage in the New Testament letter of Colossians. And the passage this morning has a connection with the major theme of 1 Peter and certainly the main lessons of the last couple of passages we've looked at in 1 Peter. So even though it's a detour, it's not that far off, we will be back on the main road next week, Lord willing.

So, let me invite your attention to Colossians chapter 1. Obviously, this is a different letter than 1 Peter so it is good for us to get our bearings a bit about this letter before digging into the passage at hand today.

This letter was written by the apostle Paul, written to a church in the city of Colossae. But it was a church that Paul had never been to. It was a church that was started by a man named Epaphras who was from Colossae, went to Ephesus where he heard the gospel preached by Paul, responded in faith, went home and told everyone there about Jesus. Others began believing in Jesus and so a local church was planted there.

At the time of this letter, Paul is in prison, probably in Rome. And while in prison, Epaphras goes to visit Paul and gives a report about this new church plant. Things were going well there, but false teachers had crept into the church, something that happened often then and really through all of history, but these false teachers were pulling their attention away from the finished work of Jesus. What they were peddling was some form of a mixture of Jewish legalism (you had to follow the Jewish law to be saved) and some type of local mysticism.

And so, in this letter Paul writes to these people he's never met to declare to them that Jesus is both sufficient for salvation and supreme over all creation. And since this is true, they should root themselves in Christ. That is the main theme of this letter.

I want us to look at a passage at the end of chapter 1 today, beginning in verse 24, but let's go ahead and start reading in verse 21 so we understand the immediate context...

Colossians 1:21-23

21 And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, **22** he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, **23** if indeed you continue in the faith, stable

and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

So, chapter one is mainly about the work of God in Christ and the supremacy of Christ over all things, but to pick it up here in verse 23, Paul says this is the gospel: the good news of God's work in Christ to reconcile former enemies of God presenting them holy and blameless. And he has done that "in his body of flesh by his death," or as Peter said in our passage last week, "being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." So, same focus here - the gospel.

And Paul says here, this gospel "of which I, Paul, became a minister." And so there is a switch in chapter one here on the focus. He was talking about God and Christ, but now he is switching to focus on his ministry. That's what this passage is all about - gospel ministry, but as you will see there is a connection with our passage in 1 Peter, in that Paul will specifically talk about not just his ministry, but *suffering* in ministry.

Remember, Peter had just reminded the Christians in exile that they will suffer for doing good. And that's ok, in fact, that is God's will, because, as we saw last week, Christ also suffered as the righteous for the unrighteous, and this is what it means to follow in his steps.

And as we go through this, we will see that part of suffering for doing good is not just a result of trying to live holy lives in an unholy world, but also will be a result for trying to speak the gospel, and as Paul will say, that's ok. We shouldn't give up. We keep speaking. We keep sharing. We keep pointing people to Jesus, even if it means suffering for his name's sake and the good of others.

So, that is the encouragement and instruction we are going to find here this morning, what it means to suffer in gospel ministry as a minister of the gospel.

So, with that in mind let's go on in Colossians 1, now verse 24...

Colossians 1:24

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

This verse is the overview statement of this paragraph, we will come back to it, because, as you can see, this is the most difficult statement to wrestle with in the entire letter. We will try to understand what Paul means that his suffering fills up what was lacking in Christ's afflictions...

But for now, let's go on...

Colossians 1:25-27

25 of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, **26** the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. **27** 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.

Here, Paul is describing the call on his life to be a servant of the gospel and Christ's body and that job description is: "*to make the word of God fully known.*" And he explains that "fullness" of the "word of God" entails two things:

1. God would reconcile Jew/Gentile relationship, making them one body. (There was obviously a superior attitude among the Jewish people in the early church. They were the chosen people, Gentiles were outside the chosen people and this attitude spilled over in this new reality of the church.)
2. God would make them one body and reconcile that one body back to Him. (This was God's plan from the beginning, "mystery" in the New Testament is used to describe a truth that wasn't seen until the life, death, and resurrection of Christ)

So, Paul explains, this is what God has called me to. He has called me to preach the gospel and explain the word of God in its fullness.

PAUL'S PERSONAL MISSION STATEMENT

Colossians 1:28

28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Now, I don't know if you've ever adopted a mission statement for your life, or your family, or your ministry, but verse 28 was Paul's: to present Christ to everyone so that they would become mature in Christ. And that is going to involve *warning* everyone, because in order to see the beauty of Christ as Savior, we need to be warned of our need for a Savior. And it is going to involve *teaching* everyone. Disciples are learners. We can't follow Jesus if we don't know him, we can't build our lives on principles we don't know, we can't make other disciples if we are disciples first. And the goal is maturity in Christ.

This also gives us an important lesson when it comes to teaching and discipleship...

Only Christ centered teaching will produce Christ centered disciples.

It's been said, "What you win them with is what you win them to." This one reason why we are so committed to Christ-centered preaching and teaching in all areas of ministry at Grace Road. From the pulpit, in our grace groups, in our grow groups, in our Rewind teen ministry, our children's ministry, in our Institute classes, we have a singular goal which is to proclaim Christ that we might present everyone mature in Christ.

So, Christ-centered teaching is vital to a local church that desires to make Christ-centered disciples. But this is true in your own growth as well, outside the ministry of the church. Whatever you regularly feed your mind and heart with is what you will grow “mature” in. We are always being disciplined by something for something. For you it could be sports. It could be the media. It could be politics. It could be current trends of thought. And because we allow ourselves to gorge ourselves on these things, we become mature in them. But we shouldn’t confuse maturity in these things with maturity in Christ.

If you want to be mature in Christ, you must feed your heart and mind on Christ. This is the goal of the church for sure, to develop mature followers of Christ, therefore, we keep Christ front and center in our teaching. But in your personal life, outside of our gatherings, keep Christ and His word front and center.

It would be a wonderful goal this year to spend more time in Scripture and less time on social media. Or to spend more time in prayer and less time online. Now, to be clear, I’m online a lot and I use social media, but I have to be careful that my mind and heart isn’t being shaped by those things as much as Christ. So, we have to be intentional with our own spiritual growth.

And this is exactly what Paul is calling this church in Colossae to. This is the vision he wants the church to catch as he describes his own ministry but he goes on to describe the hoped for results of that ministry...

RESULT & HOPE OF MINISTRY

Colossians 1:19-2:5

29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. **1** For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, **2** that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, **3** in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. **4** I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. **5** For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

This is the hope: you (and those in Laodicea, and everyone my ministry influences) will become mature and that partly looks like verse 2: *“that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”*

Again, his hope is that they would be encouraged in heart, united in love, have the full riches of understanding, wisdom, and knowledge..and again, **all of this is found in Christ!**

So, he says, it is Christ I proclaim, wanting and teaching everyone that I might present everyone mature in Christ.

BUT, the point of this passage is Paul saying, that is my goal and desire, but I am not unaware of the sufferings that have accompanied the gospel ministry I have been called to.

SUFFERING FOR MINISTRY

Colossians 1:24

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

Here Paul uses a curious phrase to describe his life and ministry. At first glance, if you didn't know Paul and his beliefs, the message of this letter, it might sound like Paul is saying that what Christ endured in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion was not enough for the salvation of his people. That there is something "lacking" with his "afflictions" and somehow Paul will complete them.

Now, there is not a consensus about what Paul means exactly here, however, it is not saying that Christ's atoning sacrifice is not enough for redemption. It was. That is clear throughout all of the New Testament.

I think the answer can be found in the similar phrasing of other passages that Paul wrote...and follow along with me here because this is important for us to grasp...

In the book of Philippians, another letter written by the apostle Paul, the situation was somewhat similar. Paul was in prison and the church in Philippi, this time a church that Paul knew very well, wanted to bring a gift to him. So they sent a man named Epaphroditus to bring the gift from the church to Paul in prison and he came back with the letter of Philippians. And in chapter 2, Paul says this...

Philippians 2:29-30

29 So receive him [*Epaphroditus*] in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, **30** for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Here again, Paul is in prison and Epaphroditus is sent by the church in Philippi to minister to him, eventually gets sick and almost dies. By coming to Paul, he could "*complete what was lacking in your service to me.*" In other words, the church made available a gift for Paul but they lacked the in-person delivery of that gift to him. By bringing the gift, Epaphroditus "*filled up*" what was "*lacking*" of the church at Philippi.

Another example is found in 1 Corinthians 16...

1 Corinthians 16:17

I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence,

The same words and phrasing is used. These guys brought a refreshment to Paul's spirit, the church at Corinth could not due to their absence. They "*made up for your absence*" or other translation says they "*supplied what was lacking.*"

This provides a background to Paul's words in Colossians 1:24...Christ suffered on the cross on behalf of His people, yet, something was lacking. The only aspect of the gospel that remained undone was the in-person delivery of this good news, the very mission Paul was tasked with.

And this mission, to bring the good news to others, had landed him in prison, yet he rejoices. He is helping the body of Christ and identifying with Christ's own suffering.

Paul certainly had a unique role in the life of the church. However, we are called to the same mission, to proclaim Christ to see others mature. We are called to make disciples, every follower of Christ has this ministry. But it is not without its difficulties.

What Paul can remind us here, is that in our effort to proclaim the gospel of Christ, we may have to share in the sufferings of Christ.

It required Christ suffering for our salvation, it will require our suffering for His proclamation.

And to be sure, this has looked and will look differently in every circumstance, but regardless of the circumstance, to proclaim Christ costs something.

For many in history, like Paul, it might mean laying down your life for the proclamation of the gospel. In fact, just yesterday (January 8) was the anniversary of the martyrdom of five missionaries to the Auca Indians of Ecuador. If you don't know this story, it really is amazing.

Long story short, five missionary families had sensed God's call to reach an unreached tribe in the Ecuadorian jungle. This tribe was known to be extremely territorial and dangerous, and yet this did not deter these missionaries from their call. After some months of trying to make contact and build trust with the Indians, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint landed on a beach in Auca territory. And the initial interaction with a few Indians went very well, however they left and a few days later, January 8th, 1956, the five men were attacked and killed by the tribe.

While there were mixed reactions to the news of what happened, the missionaries knew the risk and even more knew the importance of bringing the gospel to this tribe.

They sensed that they were to, in the words of Paul, “fill up what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” They would go and share the gospel with them though they faced real suffering. Jim Elliot famously wrote in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Thankfully, years after their death, other missionaries, including the families of the killed missionaries continued to make contact with the Auca Indians, sharing the gospel with them and seeing some put their faith in Christ.

That was, of course, 66 years ago but you understand that even today we have brothers and sisters all over the world right now really suffering because they are trying to proclaim Christ to their family, friends, and countrymen.

You probably heard of the group of missionaries in Haiti that were kidnapped in October. 17 missionaries were abducted by a gang and held for ransom for two months. Thankfully, they have all been released unharmed. But again, they knew the risks and the dangers, but they also believed that they were called to go and bring the gospel to those who needed to hear it.

Now, in light of both of these examples it is hard to say this, but we too, may have to suffer to proclaim Christ. That might not look like taking spears and arrows or being held at gunpoint, but it might look like being willing to be marginalized, ridiculed, going without, or perhaps more serious suffering.

Again, if the call is to make disciples, which involves warning everyone and teaching everyone, then there are difficult conversations to be had. The gospel is gloriously good news and yet bad news comes before the good news. That yes we declare and proclaim we have a Savior in Christ, but we also proclaim people *need* a Savior. That they need saving.

For example, in our culture, it is absolutely intolerant to speak of truth in a way that is absolute if it interferes with someone else’s beliefs and lifestyle. Our culture doesn’t just speak of truth, it speaks of “my truth” and “your truth,” believing that all ideas and opinions are of equal validity. But in a culture that is against absolute truth, to speak not only of truth but also of falsehood, is akin to hate and oppression. So, as we seek to point people to Jesus, we are pointing them to someone who is more than a moral teacher, we are pointing them to the reigning King over all who has graciously laid down his life for sinful men and women. Which means that we have to speak of sin. And to proclaim those truths might cause others to mistreat you in some way.

But notice again, the way Paul views this suffering in gospel ministry...

Colossians 1:24

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

He rejoices in them. Understand that the road for Christians in this age might be marked by suffering but that does not mean it is not also marked by joy. There is great joy to be had in gospel ministry.

Let me give you three quick reasons from Paul why we can rejoice as we suffer in filling up what is lacking Christ's afflictions.

1. We rejoice because we suffer following Christ in his suffering.

This was the reasoning we saw last week right in 1 Peter. We might suffer, because Christ also suffered. Over and over again, we are reminded that Jesus was despised, rejected, and laid down his life, and his disciples will experience the same. But that is not something to dread or despise but something to rejoice in, because we follow Christ.

Paul would say this in Philippians 3...

Philippians 3:10

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death

Rather than avoiding or despising it, this is the desire of Paul, that he might know Christ so well, he might be familiar even with his sufferings. And this suffering produces good in us.

Don't be deceived into the thinking that God is only doing good in you when things are good around you. That simply is not true. It is through our step by step journey following Christ that we are conformed to his image and that includes those steps that are the hardest to take and stand in. Again, we can rejoice because we suffer following Christ in his suffering.

2. We rejoice because we suffer for the good of others.

This is what Paul explicitly says here, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake," and he goes on to say "for the sake of the body, that is, the church." There is tremendous joy for Paul, that even if he is in prison, even if he suffers, he knows that the end result will be for the good of those he ministers to.

And this really is the way of Christ isn't it? This is the way of the gospel. Paul is clear about that in Philippians 2, that Jesus emptied himself, humbling himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8). And the end result is our salvation. As Peter said in our passage last week, Christ suffered to bring us back to God. And Paul there in Philippians 2 would say, "Have this mind among yourselves"

(Phil. 2:5). “Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also the interests in others” (Phil. 2:4).

When Christians solo in the steps of Jesus, even if it means suffering, it means that others are edified, built up. It means that others who have not heard the gospel, get to hear the good news of Christ’s love and work for them. When the end result is good for others, it becomes much easier to rejoice in the hardships for ourselves.

3. We rejoice because we suffer for the glory of God.

Paul in our passage in Colossians this morning speaks of his ministry of one proclaiming the riches of the glory of God’s work to reconcile Gentile and Jew. When we proclaim the good news, though it might cost us something we are proclaiming the glory of God.

When we were missionaries in Europe, we were asked at times what it was like to minister in a place that hasn’t, at least recently, been a harvest field. In other words, how do we stay encouraged when we don’t see as much visible fruit in our ministry as we would like and hope? My answer to that was always, I’ve learned that we have to enjoy simply sowing the gospel seed even if we don’t see gospel fruit. What I meant was, when I had a conversation with someone about Jesus, though what I wanted most was for that person to see their need for Christ and put their faith in him, even if they didn’t I could rejoice knowing that in that conversation Christ was exalted.

And that is true every time we have a conversation with some about the gospel. Whether they listen intently or shrug you off, whether they react with indifference or with hostility, we can rejoice because God was glorified as his work in Christ was proclaimed.

Further, God is glorified in our suffering because we are proclaiming his worth. We are saying even if others mock, ridicule, think differently of me, he is worth it. I will gladly incur what comes my way as long as I am found faithful to Christ.

And we are proclaiming that Jesus is sufficient to carry us through the difficulties of following him in every conversation we have.

This is what Paul joyfully proclaimed in Colossians 1:29...

Colossians 1:29

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

And the same is true for you and me today. Christ in us, the hope of glory, will sustain you and me as we seek to minister to a world that desperately needs it. Regardless of what comes in return, we can toil, relying on the work of Christ through us to redeem a people for Himself.

Now, imagine the elect exiles of our series through 1 Peter. Scattered among a people with different worldviews and beliefs, they too were called to make disciples wherever the Lord brought them. They needed to remember, just like we do today, that we might suffer for gospel ministry, but it is a calling that we do not walk through alone. Christ, the One who suffered for us, works through us. And that can carry us until his return.

CONCLUSIONS

So, are you embracing the ministry God has called you to, even if it might cost you something?

Can you say like Paul, I rejoice in these sufferings, because I am serving Christ and His body?

You may never sit in a jail cell in Rome or here in Rochester, but it will cost you something to say that Jesus is supreme and sufficient...Can you fulfill your ministry even when it includes suffering? By God's grace you can. So, let's be found faithful.

VERSES

Colossians 1:21-23

Colossians 1:24

Colossians 1:25-27

Colossians 1:28

Colossians 1:29-2:5

Colossians 1:24

Philippians 2:29-30

1 Corinthians 16:17

Colossians 1:24

Philippians 3:10

Colossians 1:29

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the statement, "Only Christ-centered teaching will produce Christ-centered disciples."
2. What might this mean for your own discipleship and spiritual maturity?
3. Explain Cody's explanation of Paul's words, "in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the body, that is, the church."
4. How might this shape the way we view evangelism and missions?

5. Why can we rejoice in our suffering for gospel ministry?