

Series Colossians

This Message The Joy of Proclaiming God's Truth

Scripture Colossians 1:24-29

In the passage for today Paul described his attitude and service on behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ. Paul did not write about himself very much, although there were times when he thought it necessary to defend and justify his ministry. When he did, it was usually to defend himself against opponents who questioned his authority as an apostle or his style of ministry.

For example, when writing to the believers in Corinth, he said, "We have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God ... We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (*II Corinthians 4:1-2, 5*).

Paul wanted the Colossian believers to accept him as an authentic teacher of truth. He thought it was important for the Colossians to have some standards by which to measure the claims people make for themselves, and by which true spiritual leadership could be recognized. In point of fact, it is necessary for church fellowships in every generation to have such standards, so this passage is very useful to us.

In order to establish his credibility and authority to the Colossian believers, Paul made two appeals: he asked the Colossians to consider his call by God and his whole-hearted, obedient, and zealous service on behalf of his Savior and Lord, Jesus. As we read the text, you will notice how Paul explains both of these reasons: he calls attention to the commission given to him by God and to his sufferings on behalf of Jesus Christ.

Read Colossians 1:24-29

Paul had an incredibly strong sense of his apostolic responsibility. He knew that he had been divinely chosen and commissioned by God “to present the word of God in its fullness and completeness” in order that “everyone might be presented perfect in Christ.” Paul had originally encountered the Lord Jesus while traveling from Jerusalem to Damascus. It was revealed to him that he “was a chosen instrument to carry the name of Jesus before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel,” and that he would suffer for the name of Jesus (*Acts 9:1-15*).

In the first verse of this passage Paul mentioned the joy he had in ministry. By human standards, his joy seemed out of place. He was writing this letter from prison. Previously he had been beaten and flogged, stoned, exposed to death several times, and suffered in several other ways (*see II Corinthians 11:23-27*). In spite of everything that had happened to him, Paul emphasized that the sufferings he endured in the course of his work were for the whole Church, including the Colossian believers, and that he was thankful for the privilege of serving God.

Believers are probably the only people who can have joy in the midst of suffering, at least, if it is suffering for the correct reasons. Paul identifies two important characteristics of his sufferings. First, the sufferings were for the sake of other people. Paul mentions suffering “for you” and “for the sake of Christ’s body.” In the Greek language the prepositions in these phrases mean “for the benefit of.” Paul considered the word of God to be so important that he was willing to endure all kinds of personal suffering in order to make it known for the benefit of others. Paul wanted “every creature under heaven” (*Colossians 1:23*) to have the opportunity to hear the gospel, and he wanted everyone who responded in faith to grow in faith. His mission field was both non-believers and believers.

Second, Paul’s sufferings are identified with the afflictions of Christ. He wrote, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions.” These words have stirred up a lot of discussion among theologians. For example, some theologians think that this verse indicates that Christ’s suffering and death on the cross did not provide a full atonement, and that the sufferings of still living saints are necessary to complete Christ’s work on our behalf. This is the reason Roman Catholic theologians believe that the veneration [worship, adulation] of human saints is a necessary part of the salvation process.

In contrast, Paul strongly emphasized in his teaching that the atonement and reconciliation of Jesus was complete, once for all, and totally adequate to deal with the spiritual problems of humanity. When Paul wrote “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions,” he was referring to his personal commission to make the work of Jesus Christ known to people who were lost in their sins. It was necessary for someone to be a witness of the salvation made possible by Jesus, and Paul was willing to share the good news of Jesus’ death with people who had never heard even though his task was often difficult and painful. In this way, Paul “filled up” or “completed” the process of salvation which was initiated by and made possible by Jesus.

Missionaries and evangelists have this same attitude about their ministry activities today. They know that unsaved people, whether they live across the street or around the world, will not receive the benefits of Jesus’ atonement unless the good news about Jesus’ death and resurrection is given to them. Paul was a pioneer missionary. He traveled to and evangelized in very difficult previously unreached areas. Likewise, modern day believers who share the good news can also find themselves in evil and difficult places. There is often a great personal cost to those who share their faith with unsaved people.

We, as modern day followers of Jesus, need to seriously reflect on the examples of both Jesus and Paul. Jesus laid aside His rights as God in order to become a man. He willingly took the form of a servant and became obedient to death. He denied Himself, suffered, and died for the sake of humanity. In the same way, Paul devoted himself to the service of others. He was willing to risk his life so that sinners might learn about the sacrifice of Jesus and come to faith in Jesus. Modern day followers of Jesus are expected to have a similar attitude, and to participate in the work which Jesus started and which will be completed only when the followers of Jesus evangelize and make disciples of non-believers. This may involve the kind of suffering that Paul experienced.

Like Jesus, Paul rejoiced in what was suffered for the sake of others. The topics of “rejoicing” and “suffering” are closely linked in several of his letters. For example, in his letter to the believers in Philippi, which was written about the same time as this letter to the believers in Colosse, he wrote, “I expect ... Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (*Philippians 1:20-21*). A few verses later, he wrote, “It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him” (*Philippians 1:29*).

There is another reason for Paul's rejoicing in suffering, and it has to do with his desire for an ever deepening relationship with Jesus. In his letter to the Philippian Church fellowship Paul wrote, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings" (*Philippians 3:10*). We can understand this statement if we remember that Jesus is the Head of the Church, His Body, which is a living dynamic organism. As the Head of such a living Body, Jesus feels and experiences and shares in the pains and afflictions of all the members of His Body.

Paul came to this understanding when he had his supernatural encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. After the "light from heaven flashed around him," causing him to fall to the ground, Paul heard a voice say, "Why do you persecute me?" It was at that point that Paul realized that he was involved in a much deeper spiritual issue than just his murderous threats against the handful of Jews who had forsaken their faith in order to follow Jesus. He learned that his actions were directly against Jesus, the Lord of glory (*Acts 9:1-5*).

I think we will agree that verse 24 is a wonderful explanation about the way Paul understood the significance of his suffering and service. He rejoiced in suffering, first, because of the eternal benefits which came to those who responded to his message, and, second, because his ministry led him into an ever-deepening union with the Lord Himself.

In verse 25 Paul refers to himself as a servant of the Church. There are several other places in Scripture where Paul speaks of himself as a servant: he was a servant "of the gospel" (*Ephesians 3:7*); "of God" (*II Corinthians 6:4*); "of Christ" (*II Corinthians 11:23*); "of a new covenant" (*II Corinthians 3:6*). Paul's attitude was very simple: he recognized that a servant was required to do everything his owner and master required him to do, regardless of the personal inconveniences and discomfort.

Paul was commissioned by God to serve the Church. His call to the ministry was part of God's plan for the evangelization of the world. Paul's assignment was very specific: he was "to present the word of God in all its fullness" to as many people as possible. It meant that Paul was to give a full or complete explanation of the true nature of the gospel.

Many of the believers in the early Church described the word of God as a “mystery” (*mysterion*). They did not mean that the gospel was difficult or impossible to understand. They used the word “mystery” to refer to truth which could only be discovered by divine revelation and only understood by the person who was indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

There were many hints and prophecies about God’s plan in the Old Testament, but it was not possible to understand the reality of God’s truth until the death and resurrection of Christ. As a result of the incarnation of Jesus, which culminated in His death and resurrection, believers can understand the eternal truth of God. It “is now disclosed in its fullness” to the people of God, “the saints.” Note that it was Paul’s privilege to make known information which had “been kept hidden for ages and generations.”

In verse 27 Paul wrote about “the glorious riches of this mystery.” Paul uses the word “riches” several times in his letters to describe various attributes of God, such as “the goodness of God” (*Romans 2:4; 9:23; Ephesians 1:18; 3:16*); “the glory of God” (*Philippians 4:19*); “the wisdom of God” (*Romans 11:33*); and “the grace of God” (*Ephesians 1:7; 2:7*). The unique part of the mystery which Paul refers to in verse 27 concerns the riches which God made known “among the Gentiles,” a relevant statement in this letter since the church body in Colosse was mostly comprised of Gentiles.

The most significant and incredible truth of this mystery is summarized at the end of verse 27: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul frequently described the believer as positioned “in Christ,” a reference to our spiritual union with our heavenly Lord who is at the Father’s right hand. However, here in verse 27 the reference is to the indwelling presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in His people. This is made possible through the Holy Spirit.

There were a few hints about this part of the mystery in the Old Testament. For example, the Prophet Jeremiah wrote, “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (*Jeremiah 31:31, 33*). Paul was given the privilege to explain how the mystery truths were fulfilled in New Testament believers. “Christ in you” is a very important part of our understanding about the fullness of the Word of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

The indwelling life of Christ is like a down payment or guarantee of our future yet-to-be-completed salvation. It is also the basis of confidence and hope. The indwelling presence of Christ in us is declared to be “the hope of glory.” Paul provided a more detailed explanation in the letter he wrote to the believers in Ephesus: “You were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession” (*Ephesians 1:13-14*).

In other words, individuals who place their faith in Jesus are marked as the property of God, His possession, and the life of Jesus is deposited in them as a guarantee of their future redemption. As believers, we acknowledge our position in Christ by faith. However, it is through our awareness of the indwelling presence of Christ that we have a more substantial proof that we belong to Christ.

Paul’s message was neither a philosophical system or a collection of rules and regulations. Rather, he taught a living and dynamic relationship with Almighty God — with the One who was the source of eternal life. In verse 28 Paul stated the core theme of his message: “We proclaim Christ.”

He then used two verbs to describe important aspects of his proclamation. The first word was “admonishing” which has the meaning “to urge,” “to warn.” Paul wanted each person to be deeply concerned about his/her need for Christ. The second word, translated “teaching,” described the sharing of information. Paul “taught everyone with all wisdom.” He taught with a wisdom which was from God, who had commissioned him and revealed truth to him.

The aim of Paul’s preaching, the reason he admonished and taught with such zeal and enthusiasm, was to “present everyone perfect in Christ.” The word “perfect” can also be translated “complete”, “full grown,” and “mature,” all good words which refer to the believer’s level of spiritual maturity. Paul gave his definition of “perfect” in his letter to the Ephesians, “that the body of Christ may be built up ... and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (*Ephesians 4:12-13*). Paul wanted every believer to be like Jesus Christ. That is a very high standard.

Because of his desire, Paul “labored” for the Church with all his strength. He “struggled,” a Greek word which means to “exert oneself like an athlete in competition.” However, Paul emphasized that his efforts were not in his own strength, but according to His (God’s) energy, literally, “according to God’s working.”

Scripture clearly states that God empowers those people He calls for ministry. He gives His authority to His servants. God had called Paul to “present the Word in its fullness” and therefore God protected and worked through and sustained Paul as he labored to build up the Church. Through faith in Christ every believer can rise above his/her natural limitations because God provides supernatural power to accomplish His purposes. Every believer has the responsibility to serve Jesus Christ. Every believer is not called to serve like Paul, but all of us can reach out to those around us. And when we do there will be joy within us.