

Colossians 1:24-27

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[0:00] Please join me in turning your copy of God's Word to Paul's letter to the Colossians. Our text for today is Colossians 1-24.

But before we get there, I want to catch you up to where we've been just beginning at verse 15 and working our way up to verse 23.

Two weeks ago, we looked at this great cosmic Christological hymn found in verses 15-20 which reads, He, being Jesus Christ, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

For by Him, all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities. All things were created through Him and for Him.

And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And 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.

[1:10] 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 the cross.

And we saw that Jesus Christ is supreme in a number of different ways. But finally, the fourth way in which He is supreme is that He has made a way of reconciliation by the cross.

And we talked about that at greater length last week, verses 21-23. Stating the condition that all of humanity finds themselves in apart from Christ, and the way in which we are once enemies of God, but made friends with God.

Verse 21 reads, And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He is now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him.

If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which had been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

[2:19] So you see there in verse 23, Paul has this ministry now of reconciliation, as do we all. And now we find in the next four verses, verses 24-27, a bit of a fleshing out of that very ministry.

So I want us to see today the aim of Paul's ministry, and also the means of Paul's ministry. And I'm front-loading you here, and I'm aware of this, but the means of Paul's ministry is suffering.

The means of Paul's ministry is suffering. And this is such a weighty topic. There's so much to this. And I feel this week that I've been rushed right into the midst of something that I can't possibly unravel in the next 30-45 minutes. There's a great breadth of teaching in the Scripture concerning suffering.

Today's sermon will be just a small piece of the pie. My head is a jumbled mess, and my heart is wrestling still with the implications of such teaching.

[3:36] Specifically, what does it mean for me? For my life? And specifically, what does it mean for the life of our church? There's so much here.

In this example of Paul's ministry, the means by which he is carrying out this ministry of reconciliation. And it's very easy for us to just run past this type of teaching.

Give it a little wave or a tip of the hat as we go by. Sure, suffering, yeah, doctrine about that. We get it. When that's a reality someday for us, we'll have the knowledge to deal with it.

And we fail to really engage it. To really work out its meaning and all of its subsequent requirements of our life. So I want to invite you to do that with me today.

To encourage you that sitting here for this bit of time and thinking about these things while I'm talking about it is not nearly enough. But you need to go from this place and continue conversations. You need to wrestle with it in your own heart.

[4:37] You need to go back and read and re-read and re-read and allow it to read you this particular text. And so I read, beginning in verse 24. Paul writes, 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. 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.

The mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to a saint. 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.

This is God's Word to us. It was written for His glory and our good. And we would all do well this morning to listen to it in order to believe its promises and to obey its commands.

Firstly, let's see the aim of Paul's ministry. Verse 25, 26, and 27. I hope you'll allow me to work backwards and that won't bother you too much.

[5:51] What is the aim of Paul's ministry? A couple of key phrases here to make the Word of God fully known. He talks about this mystery that's been hidden for generations.

And what he's talking about is the way in which the Gospel of God was meant to come and extend to the entire world. Not just a salvation for Israel, but to go much further beyond.

And the way in which that would happen in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Verse 27, To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles the saints get to know this great work among the Gentiles, the riches of His glory, which is Christ in you.

The hope of glory. This Gospel of reconciliation, bringing people back into right relationship with God that was intended from the very beginning to extend to the nations.

The purpose of God in history is that the Gospel of reconciliation spread to all peoples of the world and yield God-centered, Christ-exalting churches.

[7:01] This is the purpose of God in human history. This redemptive story is about spreading the Gospel of reconciliation to all the peoples of the world to yield God-centered, Christ-exalting churches.

This was the promise of the Old Testament. Psalm 22, verse 27 and 28. All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the Lord and He rules over the nations. This was the promise of Jesus to His disciples. Matthew 24, verse 14.

And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations. And then the end will come. This was the design of God in the cross.

As heaven's worship proclaims in Revelation 5-9, you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

[8:08] This was the final command of our risen Lord. Matthew 28, 18-20. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

This was the God-given aim of Paul's apostleship. Romans 1-5. Through Christ we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His name among all the nations.

This was Paul's holy ambition. It was rooted not just in a unique apostolic call to Paul to go to the Gentiles, but also in the Old Testament promise that is still valid today.

Paul writes in Romans 15, 20-21, citing from Isaiah 52-55, I make it my ambition to preach the Gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, those who have never been told of Him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.

[9:28] Also in Acts 13-14, citing from Isaiah 42-6, the Lord has commanded us, saying, I have made you a light for the Gentiles that you

may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.

This was the purpose of the sending of the Holy Spirit. Acts 1-8. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

Again, the purpose of God in history is that the Gospel of reconciliation, the ability for people to be reconciled to God through Christ, be spread to all the peoples of the world and yield God-centered, Christ-exalting churches.

And this is the aim of Paul's ministry as we see in those last three verses of our text today, 25, 26, and 27. This is the goal of his ministry, that these peoples might know Christ, the hope of glory. Secondly, though, what is the means of Paul's ministry? What is the vehicle that carries along this great, high, divine call on Paul's life?

[10:45] And this is where we'll spend the rest of our time in v. 24, where he says, 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 the body, that is, the church.

So these two broadening objects of his ministry. The sake of the Colossian believers. I rejoice in my suffering for your sake. And all believers, for the body of Christ, the church.

He's speaking in large terms here. The entirety of the church. And in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the body. That is, the church.

The vehicle by which his ministry is being carried along is suffering. It's very interesting, isn't it?

Very curious that we ought to really stop and pay attention to what's being said here.

If God's historical, global purposes still stand, which they do, and we are part of that process, now given as ministers of reconciliation, we really need to look at Paul's example for the means by which we are to carry the gospel to the world.

[12:08] The suffering of Paul was not a consequence of his ministry. Some would look at it that way. Here, the suffering he's referring to is his imprisonment. He is right now in prison writing this letter.

Likely a Roman prison. He's referring to that specifically, but it's not a consequence of his ministry, but rather a strategy of his ministry.

A God-given, a divine strategy of his ministry. Suffering was a primary means by which Paul spread the gospel of reconciliation to all peoples of the world in order to yield God-centered, Christ-exalting churches.

Hear me say that again. Suffering was a primary means, not the only, but a primary means by which Paul spread the gospel of reconciliation to all the peoples of the world in order to yield God-centered, Christ-exalting churches.

And nothing has changed. If you believe that it has, then you have failed to believe the gospel rightly. You have discarded the sufficiency of the Scriptures.

[13:16] You think in some way we live beyond this age. That this wasn't really written for us as Americans. But it was. Let me assure you of that.

This is the era of much modern preaching. And it is very Achan to the prosperity gospel which I hope all of you reject fully. Rather than saying believe in Jesus and He will make you wealthy and healthy.

This type of teaching says believe in Jesus and you can keep your wealth and your health. You've already got it. Just hang on to it. Jesus is a little addition to that. Fire insurance policy.

Stick in your back pocket. It also says change isn't necessary to follow Jesus. Go about your life as an American Christian. It's fine and good.

Just add a little bit of extra activity and everything will be okay in the end. Beloved, this is not the call of the gospel. And this is the great error of our day.

[14:22] It's cheap grace. The gospel is a free gift to us, but then it requires of us our lives. All of who we are. Let's look at the call of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Matthew 8, 34 and 35. If you've been with us, you should be familiar with us. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. The cross was not a beautiful thing.

The cross was not some little burden you have to bear day to day. The cross was a place of death. The cross was a place of sacrifice. The cross was a place where we lay down everything in order to gain Jesus.

Matthew 10, 16. Jesus says, Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. So be wise as serpent and innocent as doves.

[15:32] In Romans 8, 36, Paul writes, citing from Psalm 44, 22, As it is written, For your sake we are being killed all the day long. We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.

Look at the portion granted to those in Christ in 8, 35. Proceeding this, Romans 8, 36. Romans 8, 35. Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword.

Jesus goes on in Matthew 10, 17, and 18. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake. Why? At the end of verse 18. To bear witness before them and the Gentiles. The very purposes of God are being carried out in the suffering of His people.

Verse 24, this phrase is so very, very fascinating. It should draw our attention. In my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

[16:43] It's an interesting phrasing, is it not? We must be very careful at this point to not think that the affliction of the saints is somehow salvific. That Christ's suffering and death on the cross wasn't enough for the salvation of people, and so we also bring about redemptive work in our suffering.

That there's somehow some kind of holiness propitiated to people who believe because of our suffering. Right? Our suffering has nothing to do with the remediation of sin.

Christ's suffering was sufficient for that. Turn to the book of Hebrews with me, beginning in chapter 7. I'm having you turn here because I really want you to see this.

I can't rattle past this. I know so often I just spit Scripture at you. It's my hope that you go back and listen to a recording or that you're taking fast notes. For the sake of time, I try not to have you turn everywhere we go.

But you need to see this. The blood of Jesus Christ was enough to pay for the sins of the church. For all of those who would believe in Him, it was sufficient.

[17:57] It was not lacking in that sense. Right? Make sure you get this right. Hebrews 7.27 He has no need, Jesus, has no need like those high priests to offer sacrifices daily.

First for His own sins and then for those of the people since He did this once for all when He offered up Himself. A completed work.

The temple sacrificial system was an ongoing, a constantly ongoing work happening. But Jesus Christ accomplished this once for all when He offered up Himself.

Hebrews 9.12 Jesus entered once for all into the holy places.

Not by means of the blood of goats and calves, but by means of His own blood. Thus securing an eternal redemption. A completed work.

[18:59] A final thing. Once for all. Hebrews 9.26 The second part of it. Jesus has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

Hebrews 10.14 For by a single offering Jesus has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

Not sacrificed. Those who are being sanctified. Those who have believed in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross are saved for all time.

Okay? This message is the thing that we believe in. It's the way in which the Word comes to us. So do not be mistaken. Jesus' sacrifice was not lacking in its power to redeem the church from its sin. In no way was it lacking for that. Jesus' life and death was fully sufficient to save for all time those who have placed and will place believing faith in Him.

[20:04] Accomplished work. It is fully sufficient for that. So how then are Christ's afflictions lacking? Because they seem to be in some way,

right? Paul's saying that he's filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.

Let me read to you a quote from John Piper's great book he wrote called Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ in which he wrote, What is lacking in the afflictions of Christ is not that they are deficient in worth as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe.

What is lacking is that the infinite value of Christ's afflictions is not known and trusted in the world. These afflictions and what they mean are still hidden to most peoples.

And God's intention is that the mystery be revealed to all nations as I proved to you previously. So the afflictions of Christ are lacking quote unquote in the sense that they are not seen and known and loved among the nations.

So they must be carried by us. The afflictions must be taken by us and put on display by us. And in so doing we complete what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ by extending them to others.

[21:24] We put on display what Christ accomplished accomplished for those who would believe in His person and His work. A little help in this for us from a man named Epaphroditus.

Those of you who are part of community outreach groups you're meeting last week you studied this. If you'll turn to Philippians chapter 2 I'll show you quickly the similar language that Paul is using to help us understand what he means here.

I'm going to read this for you quickly just to set the stage for you.

We're really trying to get to verse 30 so hang with me if it drives you crazy I'd read fast I apologize. Philippians 2 verse 25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier and your messenger and minister to my need for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill indeed he was ill near to death but God had mercy on him and not only on him but me also lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow I am the more eager to send him therefore that you may rejoice at seeing him again and that I may be less anxious so receive him in the Lord with all joy and honor such men for he nearly died for the work of Christ risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Okay so this man named Epaphroditus was sent by the Philippian believers to bring some gift money food books something of that sort to Paul and on the journey there it would seem he became really ill almost to death of interesting note Epaphroditus is really worried about what they think about that not so much about his physical state God spares him of that and as Paul is going to send him back he's saying honor this man for the way in which he has lived for your sake and he has come he's almost died risking his life gone through some affliction some suffering risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me and that is to say that it would have been ideal it would have been most perfect for the Philippians themselves to have been there but instead Epaphroditus was sent as an ambassador he filled up what was lacking he himself came and presented it before Paul and it's the exact same phrasing the exact same Greek phrase that's used in both places to help us understand this so suffering was a primary means by which

[23:58] Paul spread the gospel of reconciliation to all peoples in the world in order to yield God-centered Christ exalting churches again a divine strategy not merely a consequence this is the way God has worked and is continuing to work in the world in the advance of his kingdom Tertullian who was a Christian who lived from about AD 160 to about AD 225 said of Roman persecution the oftener we are mown down by you the more in number we grow the blood of Christians is seed the way in which the gospel advanced so very rapidly in the very early days of the church was through the persecution of the church it had saving effect not that it was powerful for that but people looked at a people who were so strange who had their gaze so fixed heavenward who worshipped

God in such a way that even to the point of death they remained true to him this is a phenomenal thing John Piper adds to Tertullian's statement for almost 300 years Christians grew in soil that was wet with the blood of martyrs the suffering of God's saints ought to be the norm not the exception it ought to be the norm not the exception it should be normative not exceptional and it's really difficult to know what this may look like in our American setting it's a place where praise God our religious freedoms are protected or at least are supposed to be protected we are reaping the benefit of that now getting to drive onto this property with a sign kind of and meeting at a certain time in a very

public manner the fact that my preaching will be recorded and posted online

I have no fear of somebody kicking in my door as a result of this we reap benefit of this type of thing so it's hard to know exactly what this is supposed to look like what does persecution look like for the American Christian I'm not sure I completely know this is where my heart is wrestling and turning over I do believe that we're not there though maybe it's just a bit of discomfort maybe just a tiny bit of derision you may not be the cool person at your work or in your class but I think there's got to be more to it than that I wonder how we would respond our church how we would respond if there were picketers at the front of our property on a Sunday morning people with signs saying that we're hateful or that we're evil because we pursue the ways of God worse yet what if there were threats made on our lives what if I got an email this past week that said that those who show up to this property on this day will certainly be killed how do we respond to that type of threat would you all gather at dawn in a secret place because you're so hungry for Christian fellowship and for the word of God preached that you would make the effort to do that you wouldn't just show up to church when it's convenient for you when there's nothing else going on that weekend you decide to pop in would you so desire

Christian fellowship to be part of the work of the kingdom of God that you would work hard to get enough rest on Saturday night so you're ready to go at the very crack of dawn on Sunday morning rather than just incidentally you happen to get enough sleep that evening would you arrange your week around such activity to get to be with the people of God to be encouraged by them to go back out into a world that is hostile towards who you are and to what you believe I hope that you can answer with a resounding yes it would be foolish for us to meet early but if I said next week we have to there's no way around some threat that's been given to our church we have to meet at dawn next week that every one of you would be there with us that all of us would boldly proclaim the gospel come what may Paul writes in 2nd Timothy 3 12 let this stick in your mind indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ

Jesus will be persecuted not maybe but will be persecuted it's not something held for a select few for those who are to be the loudest but anyone who desires to live a godly life in Christ Jesus and beloved anyone who has been saved by Christ Jesus wants to do that wants to follow him wants to pick up the cross wants to go wherever he leads wants to turn away from the world and turn towards righteousness will be persecuted will be hated in some respect this shouldn't be some far removed foreign theory of the Christian life oh that's true of so many other places and so many other people but not us because we live here in America you have to ask yourself what is missing in your life that prevents your affliction what thing are you not doing or thing that you are doing that is preventing your affliction what comfort in this world do you hide behind what sacrifice do you need to make

[29:57] I think that if our lives looked much more sacrificial than they do the way in which we are treated in this world would be much different some would love us those people who love Christ would be drawn to us those people who don't will hate us that should be the response not this lukewarmness not this you're okay I'm okay kind of response but some people should absolutely hate us and what we stand for and this should be no surprise to us and others should love us we would be an aroma to them of Christ the contemporary Romanian pastor Joseph San who suffered greatly at the hand of Russian communists stated Christ's suffering is for propitiation our suffering is for propagation God has always used suffering in this way and he has promised it to us the seed of the gospel is sown through the suffering of his people and the way in which we suffer as well it's not just enough that we suffer but that we experience proclaim and display the supremacy of Jesus

Christ in our suffering in John 12 24 and 25 Jesus said truly truly I say to you unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains alone but if it dies it bears much fruit whoever loses his life I'm sorry whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life he's not just talking about martyrs at this point the seed that falls into the ground and dies certainly refers to martyrs and the martyrs!

death but he's referring to the daily dying of disciples of Jesus Christ the putting aside of our desire and our direction the comfort of this world and living sacrificially!

to them those who take up their crosses and follow him follow the example of his life and his death I feel the same way about it Graham our Lord was a suffering servant servant he didn't come and live a pleasure life John 13 16 he says truly truly I say to you a servant is not greater than his master nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him the proper Christian life is one of daily death it's one of daily death putting aside ourselves and pursuing with all that we are our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Paul gives example of this in this way 2nd

Corinthians 4 8 through 12 he says we are afflicted in every way but not crushed! Perplexed but not driven to despair persecuted but not forsaken struck down but not destroyed always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies for we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus sake so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh so death is at work in us but life in you and what he's just saying is that!

[33:41] the way in! you is that we suffer and we die it's the cycle that's happening in our lives of all of the comfort and all the things of this world being stripped away from us that we might have more of Christ now there are people in this world that seek suffering just for suffering's sake there are people in this world that are rightly persecuted for the wrong reasons though they're just dumb about the way they go about doing things we should be wise as serpents and harmless as doves Sam Storms wrote in his devotional book on Colossians entitled The Hope of Glory Suffering for sin is a reproach suffering for suffering's sake is perverted suffering for the sake of Christ and his people is grounds for joy 1

Peter 4 13 16 Peter writes rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed if you are insulted for the name of Christ you are blessed because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you but let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler he's saying don't pervert that kind of suffering to be about suffering for the name of Christ verse 16 yet if anyone suffers as a Christian let him not be ashamed but let him glorify God in that name and all this is why Paul was able to say now I rejoice!

in my sufferings how odd right he's able to rejoice in his suffering suffering for the name of Christ is to join Christ in his suffering and this is why this was so precious to Paul right there's a wonderful example of it in the beginning of Acts chapter 5 we see the apostles taken before a council a Jewish council and verse 40 says and when they had called in the apostles they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and they let them go put yourself in that position for a moment you're caught speaking about Jesus Christ you're called into a council you're beat and charged to not do it anymore what would be your response to that how would you feel about! that verse 42 says and every day in the temple which would have been in the very face of this council and from house to house they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus beloved if you're not okay with this teaching then you do not treasure Christ the way you ought to if you're sitting here and you're saying wait a second!

what you're! if I'm really going to follow Jesus Christ that I'm inviting suffering I'm inviting affliction that's going to be a reality of my life and my response to you is assuredly yes if you're not experiencing suffering something's wrong something's amiss in your life we need to be observing that we need to be introspective about that we need to be asking!

[37:23] if the Lord would show us ways in which we're being disobedient to his call in the gospel ways in which we don't carry our cross this is what I'm saying to you and if you're not okay with that then you don't love Jesus the way you should you don't treasure him the way that you ought to you have not counted the cost of following Jesus Christ it will cost you everything Matthew 13 44 Jesus said the kingdom of heaven treasure hidden in a field which a man found and covered up then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and he buys that field Christ is a more supreme thing so much higher and cannot be lost so we give away all those things that are temporal in our lives all of our wealth and all of our health all of the comfort in order to have more of him Paul rejoiced in his sufferings because he knew that it was for the gain of the

Colossian church he knew that it was best it was part of God's purpose in Christ for the Colossian church to witness his suffering and he could rejoice in that these larger things this heavenward perspective in conclusion suffering is a primary means by which we are to spread the gospel of reconciliation to all the peoples of the world in order to yield God centered Christ exalting churches after all Christ family church exists to glorify God by experiencing proclaiming and displaying the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all things to all peoples beloved we must ask ourselves if we are living to this high mark as a community of faith I'm confident that we have much work to do let us then together yield ourselves to the will of the Father live such radically God oriented lives that come what may we will hold high the supremacy of Jesus Christ so that God will draw men to himself let's pray together