

### Three Aspects of Paul's Service to Christ

#### Colossians 1:24-29

Colossians 1:24-29 - *"I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, <sup>25</sup> of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, <sup>26</sup> the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. <sup>27</sup> To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. <sup>28</sup> Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup> To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily."*

#### Background Notes

The great theme of Colossians is the supremacy of Christ and the all-sufficiency of Christ. Colossians 1:15-22 is one of the great Christ exalting passages in the Bible. It certainly emphasizes the supremacy of Christ.

Moving on, in verse 24 Paul began to talk about his sufferings for Christ and other aspects of his service to Christ. Why the transition? Why did he move from straight doctrine about the supremacy of Christ to writing about his service for Christ? The reason is that Paul was now showing how this great theme of Colossians was being worked out in his own life.

If Christ is indeed supreme in His person and His position, how was that great truth worked out in Paul's life? Paul tells us: the supremacy of Christ was being realized in his life of dedicated service. This should be true in our lives as well. If Christ is indeed supreme, then He ought to be supreme in our own lives, and in our Christian service.

#### Doctrinal Points

In these verses, the apostle Paul informed us of three aspects of his service for Christ: his *sufferings* on behalf of Christ (v24), his *stewardship* of the mysteries of Christ (v23-27), and his *striving* to present every person complete in Christ (v28-29). Our doctrinal points discuss these three aspects of Paul's service to Christ.

##### 1. There are two categories to the sufferings of Christ.

There are two categories to the sufferings of Christ. In verse 24 Paul said, I *"fill up in his flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ."* "Wait a minute," you may say. "I thought the sufferings of Christ were over. What's still lacking in the

afflictions of Christ? How can Paul - or anyone - fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ?" Answer: there are two categories to the sufferings of Christ.

a. First of all, there are the **sufferings of the atonement**. Those sufferings are complete. Nothing needs to be added. In John 19:30 the Lord said, "*It is finished.*" The work of salvation was finished. The sufferings of the atonement were completed.

Any idea of Christ continuing to suffer or being re-sacrificed in the liturgy of the eucharist is totally foreign to the teaching of the Bible. Hebrews 10:12 says, "*But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God*"[emphasis added]. There is nothing lacking as to the sufferings of Christ for redemption. Nothing can be added; they are complete.

b. The second category of the sufferings of Christ is the **sufferings of the Body of Christ here on earth**. These sufferings are not complete. They will continue as long as the Church, the Body of Christ, is here on earth. This category of the sufferings is in view in verse 24.

Do you remember what the Lord said when He stopped Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road, as he was on his way to Damascus to kill Christians? "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?*" (Acts 9:4). Why did the Lord say that *He* was being persecuted? Because persecuting Christians was the same as persecuting Christ, because Christians are the Body of Christ here on earth.

The sufferings of Christians today are the sufferings of Christ, but they're not the sufferings of Christ as to our atonement or our redemption. Those sufferings were substitutionary, because He suffered in our place. The sufferings of Christ today are sufferings we go through on behalf of Christ and His people.

So there are two categories to the sufferings of Christ: the sufferings of the atonement, and the sufferings that believers, who are His Body, endure here on earth today.

## **2. The Church as the body of Christ is a glorious mystery.**

One aspect of Paul's service to Christ was that God gave him a "stewardship," or a particular area of responsibility (v25). Paul was responsible to make known to the Gentiles the great mystery of the Church as the body of Christ. This mystery among the Gentiles is "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (v27).

First of all, we need to explain the word "mystery." The word "mystery" as used in the New Testament is not something mysterious. It's something that was concealed in the Old Testament but now was revealed in the New Testament.

In Colossians 2:2, the mystery is simply stated as “*the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ...*” but here in 1:27 it’s called “*the mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” It’s not two different mysteries. It’s the same mystery - just two aspects of the same mystery.

What aspect of this mystery was concealed in the Old Testament? It was truth that the Church is the Body of Christ. The truth that Gentiles would be brought under the blessing of the Messiah is certainly taught in the Old Testament. But the Church as the Body of Christ - where Jews and Gentiles would be brought together as one Body, with Christ as the Head, and His life extended to the Church as His Body, and the Holy Spirit in His Church making the Church His Holy Temple – these truths were concealed in the Old Testament. Now these great truths were being revealed. This great and glorious mystery was given to the apostle Paul as a stewardship, and he had the responsibility to make it known.

### **3. The aim of Christian service is Christian maturity.**

The apostle Paul said, “*To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily*” (v29). What was he talking about? To what end did he labor? Verse 28: “*Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.*” The goal of Christian service is Christian maturity. Paul’s aim and goal was to see every believer mature in Christ.

The word “perfect” here does not mean “sinless” - it means “complete” or “mature.” Paul’s goal was to see every believer in Christ come to maturity in Christ – “perfect” in that sense. The aim of Christian service is Christian maturity.

It is significant that Paul used the words “every” and “all,” because the Gnostic false teachers held that only a few – only a select elite group, the Gnostics - could enter into the knowledge of secret and esoteric truth. Paul said that teaching is false (along with the rest of their false teaching). Every Christian can become complete and mature (or “perfect”) in Christ. **All** Christians can be taught with **all** wisdom, because **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in Jesus Christ!

Notice that Paul’s goal was not personal popularity or successful fundraising, and his goal was not meeting social needs. Yes, of course he cared about the people’s needs – in fact, he took a collection to help the needy believers in Jerusalem. But Paul’s bottom line was to bring Christians to maturity in Jesus Christ, and this should be our aim as well. The aim of all Christian service is Christian maturity.

## **Practical Applications**

### **1. Let’s realize that Christ is at work in us!**

Verse 29: “*To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.*” That should be a great encouragement to us, because trying to accomplish the goal of bringing people to Christ and helping them to mature is

very difficult. Sometimes people seem to go backwards, and sometimes they even quit. Knowing that Christ is at work in us helps keep us going. It's a big encouragement to know that He not only gives us direction, but He gives us the strength to do it as well!

This verse reminds me of the "Men At Work" signs along the highway. Sometimes the workers are unseen because they're working below the street. Although you don't see them, they're busily at work. You may see equipment and evidence of work, but the energy source is unseen. In the same way, people don't literally see Jesus Christ at work in us. Even we ourselves don't literally see Christ at work in us - but He is! Let's realize that Christ is at work in us.

## 2. Let's try to rejoice in our sufferings for Christ.

Look again at verse 2: "*I now rejoice in my sufferings for you.*" Paul wasn't jumping up and down and praising the Lord that he was suffering, and he didn't go around looking for suffering. But when suffering did come, he was able to rejoice because he knew that the suffering didn't happen "by chance," and he knew it was for the cause of Christ.

We should have that same attitude. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "*All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.*" That verse doesn't mean that you *have* to suffer persecution - but it does mean that if you're going to live a **godly life**, you **will** suffer persecution.

We don't look for suffering, but we should realize that it will come. It may not be physical martyrdom. The suffering may be a loss of a promotion because you let it be known that you're a Christian. For students, it may be the loss of a better grade because you spoke up for biblical values and truth - because you're a Christian. You may suffer mocking or ridicule. And maybe your suffering will be physical. Recently I read about a fifteen-year-old boy in the Chicago area who was a gang member. When he became a Christian, he left the gang, and as a result he suffered a severe beating.

But no matter what form our suffering may take, let's try to rejoice in our sufferings for Christ. We can rejoice because we know that we're suffering in the line of duty – in service for the Lord! Let's not whine or complain or cry about how hard it is to be Christian. Let's try to rejoice in our sufferings for Christ!