

Series: The Letter to the Colossians

Title: "The Ministry of the Church"

Text: Colossians 1:24-29

Date: July 9, 2023

Verse 24

Paul continued his train of thought from verse 23 by saying, "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" (Colossians 1:24). Many would see verse 23 as the end of the greeting in Paul's letter. They would regard verse 24 as the start of Paul's direct instruction to the church. While this is true, it is important to note that verse 24 extends the thought of verse 23. If you recall, Paul had previously made allusion to his apostolic ministry in verse 23 ("...of which I, Paul, became a minister..."). In verse 24, he continued and expanded upon that topic. He wanted his readers to know that they should have listened to him instead of the heretics. The reason was simple —he was an apostle and they were not!

Notice that Paul said he rejoiced in "sufferings." The apostle possessed the frame of mind encouraged by James 1:3 — "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds." In Acts 16:25, Luke told of the way Paul rejoiced while imprisoned at Philippi. Paul himself gave testimony in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 of how he rejoiced despite numerous setbacks and sufferings in ministry. As he wrote to the Colossians, he gave testimony to similar rejoicing. Though he was imprisoned in Rome, he was filled with Christian joy. Paul shared about his willingness to suffer in Christian ministry in some of his other letters (2 Corinthians 1:4-6; Ephesians 3:12; 1 Thessalonians 3:6-7). In one of his letters to Timothy, he said, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect" (2 Timothy 2:10).

Why did Paul rejoice in his sufferings? Paul rejoiced in his sufferings because he knew that they contributed to gospel propagation. He told the Colossians, "I rejoice in my sufferings *for your sake*...." Though Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he knew his imprisonment was serving a positive purpose. It had given him an opportunity to focus on a letter-writing ministry to local churches. He spoke concerning the same things when writing to the church at Philippi (Philippians 1:12-14). Paul saw a providential purpose in his sufferings, so he rejoiced in them.

Paul further described the reason he rejoiced in his sufferings by saying, "...in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church." It is important to note that Paul in no way meant to indicate that he had a participatory part in Christ's atonement. One has noted that the Greek word for Christ's "afflictions" (*thlípsis*) in verse 24 is never used of the cross in the New Testament.¹ Instead of speaking of believers participating in the work of Calvary somehow, it seems Paul had two different ideas in mind. First, he meant to speak of the way in which he joined Christ in suffering on behalf of Christ's truth. While He was on Earth, Jesus made mention of the way His disciples would suffer for the gospel

¹ Wright, 89.

(John 15:18-20). As Paul sat imprisoned in a Roman jail, he knew his sufferings were a result of his allegiance to Jesus.

Second, Paul's perspective on suffering was rooted in his understanding of the believer's union with Christ. Such unity is conveyed by the "head" and "body" metaphor mentioned earlier in Colossians (Colossians 1:18, 22) and elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 5:23). Through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (which is the Spirit of Christ), believers are mystically bound to one another and to Christ. They are in Christ and Christ is in them. Paul made reference to such union at the outset of his letter through his famous "in Christ" title for the church (Colossians 1:2).

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Paul made mention of the believer's union with Christ by speaking of how there is a sense in which believers participate in Christ's crucifixion and resurrection through the new birth. Writing to the Galatians, he said, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). To the Romans he said, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 8:3-4). The work of Christ in a believer's life accomplishes a mystical and mysterious union with Christ. Paul knew that his sufferings on behalf of Christ were tied to this work.

But why did Paul make such a bold reference to his sufferings writing to the Colossians? He undoubtedly wanted to contrast his ministry with that of the Gnostic heretics. His ministry was validated by his willingness to suffer for truth. The Gnostics had "plausible arguments" (Colossians 2:4), but their message hadn't been tested by the fires of affliction. Sure, they were glad to spread their teachings in a church that had been established by gospel truth (Colossians 1:7), but were they willing to suffer for what they taught?

Here we find one of the great apologetic arguments for the Christian faith. The message of Jesus is unique from other worldviews because of the way the ambassadors of Jesus' message were all willing to suffer on behalf of it. One Christian apologist has noted: "...the New Testament writers suffered persecution and death when they could have saved themselves by recanting. If they had made up the Resurrection story, they certainly would have said so when they were about to be crucified (Peter), stoned (James), or beheaded (Paul). But no one recanted — eleven out of the twelve were martyred for their faith (The only survivor was John, who was exiled to the Greek island of Patmos). Why would they die for a known lie?"² Such was the essence of Paul's argument to the Colossians in 1:25. The church should have trusted his preaching above the preaching of the Gnostics. His willing to suffer on behalf of Jesus' gospel gave witness to the veracity of Jesus' gospel.

Verse 25

² Geisler, Norman L. and Frank Turek. *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be An Atheist*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Crossway, 2004), 292.

Paul continued his description of his ministry by saying, "...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" (Colossians 1:25). As in verse 23, Paul meant to use the word "minister" in an unofficial sense. He did not implement the word as an official title for a church leader. Paul used the word to speak of his service on behalf to he church. When Paul was converted the Lord immediately called the man to service. On the road to Damascus, Paul was told, "But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a *servant* and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you" (Acts 26:16).

Because of the Lord's calling on his life, Paul regarded himself as a servant to the church. However, his service was wrapped up in his role as an apostle. This was his point in Colossians 1:25. To speak of his apostolic ministry, Paul referred to "the stewardship" he had received "from God." The word rendered "stewardship" was used in the ancient world of a slave who was given household management responsibilities by his or her master.³ See Luke 16:2-4 for such usage. Paul often applied the term to his role as an apostle (1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 3:2). As the twelfth and final apostle who was "born out of due time" (1 Corinthians 15:8, KJV), Paul was given a special stewardship to proclaim the gospel to the Gentile world (Acts 22:21; Galatians 1:16).

Why did Paul speak of this stewardship when writing to the church at Colossae? He knew there were spurious doctrines in the church. He knew some had an exclusivist doctrine that promoted Jews as superior to Gentiles. He wanted his readers to know that teachings couldn't be separated from the teachers who taught them.⁴ Hearers needed to consider the substance of the teaching they heard, but they also needed to consider its source. The true believers at Colossae should have given credence to Paul, not the Gnostics. The reason was simple — he was an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. He had been given a special stewardship to preach the gospel to the Gentile world.

Paul appealed to his apostolic authority just a couple of verses earlier. In verse 23, he spoke of himself as "a minister" of "the gospel...which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven." Chained and imprisoned in a Roman prison cell, Paul felt the need to remind his readers of his apostolic authority. He knew the Gnostic pundits had a smooth way of talking. Their arguments seemed convincing. Paul would make mention of such things later in his letter, saying, "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments" (Colossians 2:4). Though the teaching of the Gnostics seemed interesting and appealing, the true believers at Colossae needed to stick with the truth of Jesus, as delivered by Jesus' apostles.

Shortly before His crucifixion and departure from Earth, Jesus instructed the Twelve concerning these things. He told them, "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have

³ Robertson, 484.

⁴ Johnston, Mark G. *Let's Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 41.

said to you” (John 14:25-26). Our Lord’s words had special application to the disciples. In the Lord’s program of redemption, they were anointed to deliver the New Testament dispensation of truth (Ephesians 2:20; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). They spoke authoritatively on behalf of the Lord. Paul made mention to such things when combatting error at Corinth. He appealed to his standing as apostle, saying, “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 9:1-2). When Peter wrote his letters, he gave witness to similar things. He even recognized that Paul’s writings were to be regarded as being on par with Hebrew Scripture (2 Peter 3:15-17).

Paul’s point in verse 25 was simple. The Colossians needed to shun self-appointed preachers of truth. They needed to stick with and stay grounded to the truth of Jesus that was delivered by His specially-appointed ambassadors — the apostles. Paul’s words have meaning for us today. The way of salvation isn’t fully known through the teachings of self-appointed messengers of God who are detached from apostolic truth. Believers should be on guard against the messages of ones like Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russel, Ellen G. White, and the like. However, they ought to be on guard against any “Christian” teacher that departs from the plain teaching of Jesus and His apostles. The need to be vigilant is perhaps greater than ever, when one considers the ease at which non-apostolic doctrines are spread through television, the internet, and social media.

In speaking of his readers need to stick to apostolic truth, Paul told of the way he was committed “...to make the word of God fully known....” The word rendered “fully” was a popular one in Paul’s letter. The verb form of the word (Colossians 1:9; 2:10; 4:17) and its cognates (Colossians 1:19; 2:9) appear repeatedly. It is believed that the Gnostic heretics liked to use the word to refer to a supposed “fullness” they received by interacting with special knowledge and angelic intermediaries. Paul wanted his readers to know that the true fulness of God was to be found in the apostolic message, since it was that message that declared truth concerning Christ who contained “all the fulness of God” (Colossians 1:19).

Ultimately, the act of making God’s “word...fully known” was the purpose of Paul’s ministry. He understood the nature of Jesus’ Great Commission (Matthew 28:19). It is for this reason that he instructed Timothy: “...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). For the apostle, the purpose of the church, and thus the purpose of his ministry, was to proclaim the transforming truth of Christ to the whole world (Romans 1:16; Acts 20:27). The Word of God was central to Paul’s ministry, and it should be central to the ministry of any local church. It is for this reason that Paul was willing to gladly suffer in ministry.

Verse 26

Paul continued his discussion concerning his ministry by describing the gospel as “... the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints” (Colossians 1:26). The word “mystery” was a loaded one. It was based on a word that

meant “to initiate.” It came from a word that meant “to wink.”⁵ In the ancient Graeco-Roman world, society was inundated with well-known “mystery” cults. Many of these were associated with various trades. The Roman Army had Mithraism. Samothracian mysteries were popular with ancient sailors. On top of these, there were many more. John made allusion to mystery practices when writing to the church at Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17). Mystery cults often gave adherents secretive new names. They also hosted secretive meals and gave members special stones inscribed with new names to be used during cult activities (Revelation 2:17).

The prevalence of mystery religions in the first-century worlds had caused elements of such religions to creep into the church. Paul consistently presented the gospel as the true mystery of human history. Thus, he used the Greek term for mystery (mustérion) to speak of Christ and all of the Old Testament promises related to Christ (Romans 11:25; 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:7; 4:1; Ephesians 1:9, 3:3, 4, 9; 6:19; 1 Timothy 3:9, 16). As used by the apostle, the term mystery meant “that which is hidden and undiscoverable by human means, but that which has been revealed by God.”⁶

In reading Colossians, we find that Paul used the concept of “mystery” on a few occasions (Colossians 1:26, 27; 2:2). It seems that the false teaching at Colossae contained some elements of the mystery cults that were popular in the ancient world. Paul wanted his readers to know that the gospel was the mystery with which they needed to be fascinated. In using the term, however, Paul did not mean to speak of the gospel as a secretive and hard-to-understand type of thing. Nor did he mean to use the term “mystery” in the way we often think of it, as if the gospel was like an Agatha Christie “mystery” that had to be figured out or solved. As used by Paul, the term to speak of the way the full realities of the gospel were concealed to a degree throughout the ages, yet fully revealed in the coming of Christ. The apostle gave a straightforward definition of Biblical mystery in his first letter to the church at Corinth, saying, “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory” (1 Corinthians 2:7).

To further rebuke the folly of his opponents, Paul spoke of the mystery of Christ as being “hidden for ages.” The term for “ages” (aión) was another cherished term of the Gnostics. It spoke of “successive periods of time.”⁷ The heretics at Colossae maintained that the great “Supreme Being” revealed himself to humanity over a long period of time via different “ages” and “angels.” Paul contradicted such claims. Yes, the gospel had been hidden in a sense (Deuteronomy 29:29). And, yes, the Lord did unveil His plan of redemption over a series of ages, as the Lord communicated redemptive truth through a series of covenants. However, with the stewardship of gospel truth given to Paul, the Lord’s message of redemption had been made fully known. Paul’s readers did not need to pray to angelic intermediaries or listen to the secrets of the Gnostic heretics.

Verse 27

⁵ Robertson, 484.

⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 462.

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 462.

Paul continued his discussion concerning the mystery of Christ by saying, “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” (Colossians 1:27).

The words “God chose to make known” placed emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation. Ultimately, the Lord’s designs of redemption are not of human conception or invention. Neither are they based on human merit or ingenuity. The message of Christ did not start with any man or woman. It had its source in the Lord. No preacher of Christ can ever boast of any special standing before the Lord. The prophet Amos knew this well. When he preached, he openly proclaimed before the king, “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” (Amos 7:14-15). When Jesus called the Twelve unto Himself, he placed emphasis on such things, saying, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you” (John 15:16).

For Paul’s readers, the sovereignty of God in the gospel message was important. Heretics boasted of supposed special knowledge. They positioned themselves as the source of truth within the church at Colossae. Paul wanted his readers to remember that the true gospel message had been sovereignly revealed by the Lord through the Lord’s chosen means of revelation — the prophets and the apostles. Such knowledge should have led Paul’s readers to humble gratitude and joyous praise.

Notice Paul’s emphasis on “Gentiles” in verse 27. The heretics at Colossae minimized the place of non-Jewish people in the Lord’s program of redemption. See Colossians 2:16-17 for the way they demanded adherence to Jewish customs. As the Lord’s specially appointed apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; Galatians 1:16), Paul was committed to proclaiming Christ to those outside of Israel.

Paul wanted his readers to know that both parties — Israel and Gentiles — had hope of great “riches” in Christ. For the apostle, the gospel message was like an inexhaustible storehouse of wealth to be explored and enjoyed by all peoples. He spoke of Christ in such terms elsewhere in his letters (Ephesians 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:16; Philippians 4:19). He would later use the same term for riches in Colossians 2:2. He wanted his readers to look to Jesus for spiritual wealth, not the religious means the false teachers promoted — visions, regulations, human philosophy. Paul knew true spiritual joy and satisfaction is found only in the mystery of Christ. One has said, “Looking into his astonishing plans is — according to the metaphor Paul has used — like exploring a palace richly stocked with treasures, each one revealing more fully than the last the majesty of the owner.”⁸

The phrase “Christ in you” was significant. It highlighted the doctrines of union and communion with Christ. Paul had alluded to such doctrines in the introduction of his letter, using his famous “in Christ” title for the believers at Colossae (Colossians 1:2). One has defined Paul’s words in Colossians 1:27 as pointing to “...the personal

⁸ Wright, 92.

experience and presence of Christ in the individual life of believers.”⁹ Paul’s readers were being tempted to make their religion all about ritualistic requirements, special knowledge, and angelic experiences. Paul wanted them to know that Christ was the sum and substance of true religion.

What did Paul mean by “...the hope of glory?” Did he mean to speak of the glory of God? Was it his intent to speak of believers living in the blazing radiance of God’s glory in the future? While salvation does indeed secure such things for the believer, it seems Paul’s meaning in Colossians 1:27 was something different. His intent was to speak of the way in which the glory man first enjoyed in the Garden of Eden will be restored in the New Heaven and the New Earth. It is important to note that the term “glory” was “a comprehensive word for God’s glorious presence.”¹⁰ When Adam and Eve sinned, they experienced the loss of a glory they enjoyed as God’s image bearers. This happened at sin and with their exile from God’s presence. In Romans 3:23, Paul would say, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” In Colossians 1:27, Paul’s point was that the glory lost because of the First Adam’s sin is regained through the Second Adam’s salvation (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Verse 28

Paul spoke more specially of the nature of his ministry in verse 28, saying, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Colossians 1:28). Paul’s proclamation at the outset of verse 28 (“Him we proclaim”) was a reiteration of what he said previously in verse 25 (“to make the word of God fully known”). The apostle wanted his readers to clearly understand that proclaiming Christ was the central thrust of his ministry. Any ministry that departed from such a standard was not a true Christian ministry. One has commented on Paul’s focus in our verses saying, “...these words serve, for Christian preachers and teachers, as a constant reminder of their central calling, not (first and foremost) to comment on current affairs or to alleviate human problems, good and necessary as those actions may be, but to announce that Jesus is Lord.”¹¹

Notice Paul’s three-fold use of the word “everyone” in verse 28. Paul’s intent was to debunk the exclusivist doctrine of the Gnostics and Judaizers at Colossae. One has said the church was marked by “an intellectual exclusiveness.”¹² Paul wanted his readers to know that he had a ministry that was open to every man and woman. His words paralleled his words in Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

To speak of his ministry to all people, Paul spoke of three actions involved in his preaching ministry — “proclaim,” “warning,” and “teaching.” The first activity involved the public proclamation of the gospel. The Greek word for “proclaim” was *kataggéllō*.

⁹ Robertson, 485.

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 462.

¹¹ Wright, 93.

¹² Robertson, 485.

It meant “to announce” or “to proclaim far and wide.”¹³ It was used of an official public proclamation in the first century world. As used by Paul in Colossians 1:28, the verb appeared as a present tense verb, denoting continual action in the Greek.¹⁴ The apostle’s life was devoted to incessant gospel proclamation.

Along with proclaiming, Paul was committed to “warning.” The Greek word underlying English translations was the word *nouthetéo*. The word forms the title for the popular Christian form of counseling known as “nouthetic counseling.” The word is sometimes translated “to admonish.” It literally mean “putting into the mind.” Thus, it conveyed the idea of “setting...someone’s mind into proper order, with the implication that it has been in some way out of joint.”¹⁵ We can interpret the word as referring to corrective instruction. The New Testament reveals that such correction is an integral part of Christian instruction (Acts 20:31; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12). Perhaps Paul gently reminded his readers at Colossae that admonishment was a part of Christian teaching, since his letter contained so much correction concerning false teaching at Colossae.

On top of describing the three actions that characterized his ministry, Paul spoke of the overarching goal of his ministry. He said he aimed “to present everyone mature in Christ.” The word translated “present” is the same one Paul used back in verse 22. In that verse, Paul used the word to speak of the end-time event in which believers will be presented as “holy,” “blameless,” and “above reproach” before the Lord. In verse 28, Paul used the word to speak of the role he played, along with all other gospel ministers, in contributing to that end time presentation. Through proclaiming, warning, and teaching, Paul had a part in making sure God’s people progressed in their sanctification.

To speak of the believer’s sanctification, Paul used a word rendered “mature.” It was the Greek word *téleios*. It spoke of a level of perfection or completion in one’s development.¹⁶ However, it did not refer to the idea of a sinless estate.¹⁷ Though Christians will never achieve a finalized perfection on this Earth (1 John 3:1-2), they are to strive for a relative perfection (1 Peter 1:16). Paul knew that gospel preaching and teaching had a part to play in such development.

Verse 29

Paul continued his description of his ministry by saying, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). The word rendered “toil” is one that meant “wearisome effort” or “to work to exhaustion.”¹⁸ Contrary to popular perspectives, gospel ministry — when done in the right way and

¹³ Robertson, 485.

¹⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹⁵ Wright, 93.

¹⁶ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹⁷ Wright, 94.

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

for the right reasons — can be very arduous work. To emphasize this reality, Paul used a second word to speak of the difficulty he experienced in ministry. The word rendered “struggling” was the Greek word (*agōnizomai*) from which we get our word “agonize.” It was used in the first-century world of athletic games.¹⁹ One has said, “The athletic picture behind this word emphasizes Paul’s missionary work, with all its attendant toil, tireless exertion, and struggles against all manner of setbacks and opposition.”²⁰ Paul used the word to depict his ministry on a number of occasions in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 9:25; 1 Timothy 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:7).

Despite his effort in ministry, Paul knew his real power came from another source. He referenced “energy” that “powerfully” worked within him. His words were a clear reference to Holy Spirit power. The word rendered “energy” was the Greek word *dunamis*. The term was used by Jesus in Acts 1. Before ascending to Heaven, the Lord instructed His apostles to give witness to Him in all the Earth. However, He also promised to send them a source of power for witnessing: “But 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” (Acts 1:8).

Though Paul’s ministry was marked by numerous setbacks, sufferings, and struggles, he had confidence that the power of the Holy Spirit was at work. He knew that his fleshly efforts accomplished nothing. It was God’s power that converted the lost and edified the saints. Yes, Paul worked hard in the ministry, but he ultimately trusted in God to do the work that needed to be done for the progress of the faith. For him, there was no “either/or” dichotomy when it came to human responsibility and divine sovereignty. He believed in both realities. His words in Colossians 1:29 make such evident. In addition, the apostle professed something similar in 1 Corinthians 15:10, saying, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” The Lord’s servants are always called to work hard for the sake of gospel proclamation. As they do, they are to trust in the Lord’s power to build the church.

¹⁹ Wright, 93.

²⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.