

Paul's Ministry Defined

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[0:00] Let's go ahead and read our passage for tonight.

We're going to look at Colossians 1, verses 24 through 29. This will take us to the end of chapter 1. Starting in verse 24, Paul wrote, So as we've been going through chapter 1, we've been listening to Paul's letter to the Colossians, and he's been explaining and confirming the extraordinary understanding he has of the times in which they live.

And when you think about it, their times weren't all that much different than what we deal with today. First, when he was looking at their times, he expressed how he was constantly thanking God and praying for them.

And that was because the gospel they had heard was bearing fruit and increasing in the whole world, as well as in their own lives. We saw that when we looked at verses 3 through 14 of chapter 1.

Then he showed that the universal significance of the gospel is because of who Christ is. And Christ is the one on whom all things depend, and through whose death all things are reconciled.

[2:06] We saw that in verses 15 through 20. Then Paul focused on what had happened to the Colossians themselves because of Christ and his death. They were once alienated, but now they're reconciled, and one day they're going to be presented blameless.

And he then returned to the fact that the gospel they had heard that was achieving all this was for all creation under heaven. The message that Paul wants the Colossians and us to understand is that the gospel is the most powerful force on earth.

And that's still true today, but given our society today, is it sometimes hard to believe that the gospel is the most powerful force on earth? It's not easy to see that the gospel you believe in is really so powerful when you find so few people these days are persuaded by it or even interested in it.

The society around us is moving further and further away from any positive recognition of the truth of the gospel. And many of those who take any notice at all of Christianity grow more and more disdainful of the gospel.

So it's very easy to think that the gospel maybe is not quite as significant as it's being claimed to be. But if we think that today, think about how the Colossians must have looked at it.

[3:27] Because the Colossians were actually in a worse position than we are. Because Paul's enemies made much of the fact that the great apostle was a prisoner of Rome.

And the false teachers in Colossae probably ridiculed Paul and used this as a weapon to fight the truth of the gospel. And Paul turned this weapon around and used it to defeat his enemies and build a closer relationship with the church in Colossae.

And that's what we're going to see tonight. We're going to break tonight's verses into three sections starting with verses 24 through 26. And the first thing we see is the characteristics of Paul's ministry.

So the characteristics of Paul's ministry. Listen to verses 24 through 26 again. Paul wrote, One characteristic of Paul's ministry we see here is suffering.

Suffering. Suffering is precisely what God told Paul to expect. And in Acts 9, after Paul's conversion experience, but before he regained his sight, Jesus told Ananias to go to Paul.

[5:05] And when Ananias was concerned about going to Paul, we find these words in Acts 9 verses 15 and 16. Acts 9 verses 15 and 16 say, But the Lord said to him, Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. Then in 2 Corinthians, Paul provided more detail about his suffering. And we'll just look at a small section of that.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 11 verses 24 through 27. Paul wrote, Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. A night and a day I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers, and toil and hardship through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, cold and exposure.

Perhaps even more surprising is that in Colossians 1.24, Paul says that he rejoices in that suffering. That obviously has to sound strange at first, but others in the Bible have a similar perspective about suffering.

[6 : 42] In Matthew 5.10-12, Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, as well as for those who are reviled or slandered falsely on Jesus' account.

Rejoice and be glad, said Jesus, for your reward is great in heaven. That is verse 12a. So Jesus saw no benefit or profit in suffering for suffering's sake alone, far less in suffering the consequences for penalty of some crime or sin that you might have committed.

But suffering for Jesus' namesake was altogether something else entirely. Then we see the apostles' perspective on suffering as well when we get to Acts 5.

Listen to Acts 5.41. Actually, we won't read the verse, but we'll summarize it here. After being beaten, the apostles left their persecutors rejoicing. So, of course, the beating had to hurt, and it was undoubtedly very painful to them, maybe even permanently disabling for some of them, that they rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.

And then in Romans 5, verses 3-5, Paul again declared, we rejoice in our sufferings. And the reason why he said he rejoiced in the sufferings is because we know that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

[8 : 07] And this hope is not of the sort that disappoints. So by itself, suffering is senseless. But Paul saw it as a means to a higher and spiritually superior end, and that's the development of Christ-like character and despair-defeating hope.

Paul even goes so far as to describe suffering for Jesus' sake as something we should acknowledge as a divine gift. You'll find that in Philippians 1-29.

And Peter gently rebuked his readers for being surprised that they suffered, describing it as a blessing and an indication that the spirit of glory and of God rest upon them. And that comes from 1 Peter 4, verses 12-16.

So how do you think we can account for the perspective that suffering for Christ is a good thing? Actually, the only way to account for this perspective is on the assumption that there's something spiritually and morally superior, both here and in the age to come, that can only be attained by the means of willfully and joyful submission to suffering.

And this was certainly Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 1, verses 8 and 9. Listen to those verses. He said, For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia.

[9 : 28] For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us not rely on ourselves, but on God, who raises the dead.

So that's an important piece there. Suffering in that case, according to Paul, was to make them not rely on themselves, but to rely on God.

We know that Paul was the chosen apostle to the Gentiles. In fact, he was a prisoner in Rome because of his love for the Gentiles. He was arrested in Jerusalem on false charges.

And if you'll remember, the Jews listened to his defense until he mentioned his love for the Gentiles. Once he used the word Gentiles, it was that word that infuriated them and drove them to ask for his execution.

The Gentile believers in Colossae had every reason to love Paul and be thankful for his special ministry to them. But there was another cause for Paul's rejoicing. And he says that he was suffering for the sake of Christ's body, the church.

[10 : 36] There was a time, we know, that Paul had persecuted the church himself and caused it to suffer. But now Paul devoted his life to the care of the church. And when he suffered, he didn't ask, as some believers might, what will I get out of it?

Instead, we see him asking, how much will God let me put into it? And the fact that Paul was a prisoner didn't stop him from ministering to the church. We initially skipped over the most difficult part of verse 24, and that part is the part where Paul says that in his sufferings, he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

As you can imagine, that statement has been the subject of a lot of controversy. If you talk to a Roman Catholic, you'll find out that the Roman Catholics have imagined here a reference to the suffering of Christians in purgatory.

Christ's suffering they maintained wasn't enough to completely purge us from our sins, so the Christians have to make up what was lacking in Christ's suffering on their behalf by their own suffering after death.

Of course, we know, though, that there's nothing about purgatory in the Bible, and we also know that can hardly be Paul's point. He's just finished demonstrating in our earlier verses that Christ alone is sufficient to reconcile us to God.

[11:58] To immediately follow that up by teaching that believers must help pay for their own sin would undermine his whole argument that he just said in the earlier verses. Other places in the New Testament are clear that Christ's sufferings need nothing else added to them.

In Jesus' death on the cross, the work of salvation was completed, and the Colossian heretics taught that human works were necessary for salvation, but to teach that believers suffering was necessary to help pay for their sins would be to play right into the false teacher's hands.

And when Paul uses the term afflictions in that verse, we find that the word is used nowhere else in the New Testament to speak of Christ's sufferings.

So that's another indication that it can't be speaking of Christ's sufferings there as being insufficient. So we've just ruled out many things that Paul can't mean, but we still haven't talked about what Paul does mean.

So what really does he mean when he says we're filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?

Well, it's pretty simple actually. What he's saying is that he was enduring suffering on behalf of Christ.

[13:09] The world hated Christ, but now that Christ is not around to persecute in bodily form, they persecute his followers instead. Paul's attitude is that Jesus took the blows meant for me, so I'll take the blows meant for him.

Once Jesus ascended to heaven, he was out of their reach, but because his enemies had not filled up all the injuries they wanted to inflict on him, they turned their hatred on those who preached his gospel.

So it was in that sense that Paul filled up what was lacking in Christ's afflictions. And in 2 Corinthians 1-5, Paul wrote that we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings.

We know from what we read in the other cross-references that Paul bore in his body the marks of the blows that people really intended for Christ. So he not only suffered for Christ, but he also suffered for the sake of the church.

And even today, those who wish to represent Christ in his church must be willing to suffer for his name if that's what it comes down to. In verse 25, we see a second characteristic of Paul's ministry, and that characteristic is stewardship.

[14:24] Paul says he became a minister according to the stewardship from God. Stewardship actually translates a compound word that's made up of house and manage.

It means to manage a household as a steward of someone else's possessions. Stewards in those days had oversight of the other servants, and they handled the business and financial affairs of the household, and that freed the owner to travel and to pursue other interests.

So being a steward was a position of great trust and responsibility in the ancient world. Paul's imprisonment did not mean that the might of the Roman Empire or the schemes of the Jewish authorities were mightier than the gospel of Christ.

Far from it, it actually meant the opposite. The suffering of Paul, the servant of the gospel, and the servant of the church, was according to God's plan, and that's what Paul is getting across to his readers here.

In verse 25, Paul says that the stewardship from God was given to me for you. And in that context, you almost certainly means you Gentiles who are hearing this letter being read.

[15:37] So Paul had been commissioned by God to take the gospel of Christ to the nations. And so this is Paul's astonishing claim here. He's saying that as a divinely appointed servant of the

gospel, he was playing a particular part in the realization of God's plan for the world.

He meant no less than this when he introduced himself to the Colossians as an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God. So it's interesting to think, isn't it, the false teachers in Colossae probably used Paul's imprisonment to show that Paul was weak and the gospel was weak.

Paul is saying, no, you've got it backwards. This is all part of God's plan, and I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be. It's actually evidence that God really is in control. And the plan of which Paul was a steward was to make the word of God fully known.

And really, that translation doesn't quite adequately say it. More literally, it says, to fulfill the word of God, or to bring the word of God to its fulfillment.

And the word of God is the promise of God, the purpose or plan that God made known through the Old Testament prophets. So again, Paul's saying here that he was a servant of the gospel in accordance with God's plan to fulfill all that he had promised and purposed.

[16 : 59] So Paul was making a remarkable claim for his role as a servant of the gospel. In verse 26, God's plan is called the mystery or the secret.

And here again, Paul is taking up an Old Testament idea. It's found, for example, in the story of Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Daniel 2.

The mystery was revealed to Daniel in 2.19, who then prays God as the one who gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding.

Daniel then informed Nebuchadnezzar that there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries and that he had done just that for Daniel. So great King Nebuchadnezzar, for all of his excessive wealth, power, and glory, had no idea of God's secret plan.

It was a complete mystery to him. And even when God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream that contained the plan, it remained a mystery to Nebuchadnezzar. Only when God revealed the mystery to a Jewish youth named Daniel who explained it to Nebuchadnezzar could the king actually know anything of it.

[18 : 11] And the mystery or secret that was made known in Daniel 2 was God's plan for world history dominated as it appeared to be by powerful pagan kingdoms. One day a kingdom would come that would do away with all kingdoms.

And in that case, Daniel said the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed. Listen to Daniel 2.44 where Daniel talks about just that.

Daniel 2.44 says, and in the days of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people.

It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever. In Daniel's day, nobody could ever have guessed that such a plan existed by simply looking at the state of world politics.

Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem, the city of God, and God's temple there. He'd taken captive Israel's king, Jehoiakim, but there was a secret plan known only to those whom God had revealed the mystery.

[19 : 22] And this is the idea that Paul takes up in Colossians 1.26. The big difference, though, between Daniel and Paul is this. The plan now was just to not make known the plan.

That's what happened with Daniel already. But the plan now was to fulfill the plan, to bring to fulfillment God's promises, and to work God's purposes among the nations.

So the secret plan or mystery had been hidden for ages and generations. Paul's referring to the whole period of the Old Testament. Throughout these centuries, of course, much had already been made known.

We've looked before at God's promises to Abraham in Genesis 12. We've talked about his promises to Israel in Exodus. We've also seen his promises to David in 2 Samuel.

But we've just seen that the mystery was made known to Daniel. But even in those cases, it still remained somewhat of a mystery because they didn't know where God's promises would be realized.

[20 : 25] This part remained hidden for the ages. But now the mystery has actually been revealed to his saints. Things have now changed and the secret is out.

And God has chosen to make known his secret plan to certain people of his followers and that is certain Jewish people at first. Paul's referring to the apostles and of course we know that he was one of them.

So once again, Paul's driving home the point that some of the characteristics of his ministry look bad, but he is just fulfilling exactly what God had purposed for him to do. So now that we've looked at the characteristics of Paul's ministry, let's move to the second section of the study. And in verses 27 and 28, we see the content of Paul's message. So the content of Paul's message is what we'll look at next.

Paul summarizes the mystery that he just referenced in verse 26, and here are verses 27 and 28 of Colossians 1 again. Paul said to them, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this ministry, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

[21:42] Him we proclaim, warning everyone, and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. So Paul explains in these verses what the mystery is.

The mystery is more than that the Gentiles would be saved. We've talked about how that in itself was no mystery by this time because the Old Testament often spoke of Gentile salvation.

The mystery is that they would be fellow citizens and fellow heirs, members of the same body with Jewish believers. So this mystery was once long hidden, but it's now revealed, and it's that the Jews and the Gentiles were no longer two people, but they were being brought together in Christ as one new man, equal in every way to each other.

The Old Testament predicted the coming of the Messiah, but the idea that he would actually live in his redeemed church made up mostly of Gentiles was not revealed in the Old Testament.

The New Testament is clear that Christ by the Holy Spirit takes up residence in all believers, and the revelation of the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles awaited the New Testament unveiling.

[22:59] So believers, both Jew and Gentile, now possess the surpassing riches of the indwelling Christ. And this is not the only place where Paul talks about that.

In Ephesians 2, he expanded on this concept, so we're going to read a rather lengthy passage from Ephesians 2. This is Ephesians 2 verses 11 through 22.

Paul said to them, Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands.

Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

[24:22] And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. Then in Colossians 127, back in our text tonight, Paul refers to the riches of the glory of this mystery.

And there's glory or divine splendor or radiant majesty in this truth that's very rich and unfathomably deep. The mystery is that the Lord Jesus Christ, the same Lord of glory, is now in you.

Gentiles who believe in him. And so of course we know why that would have set so poorly with the Jews who refused to believe Christ. They believed they were going to be the chosen people and that the Gentiles were second-rate citizens.

But Paul is saying that he lives and abides in you, not merely with you or beside you or above and below you. He's actually in you. And Paul says this is the hope of glory.

[25:52] So Christ living in you is the ground and foundation and cause for your hope that you will one day enter into the full divine glory. Christ living in you is also the assurance, trumping all evidence to the contrary, that you and I will share in the glory that is to come.

This hope of glory is what makes the suffering for the gospel worthwhile. And here are some other references that show that the hope of glory is what makes suffering worthwhile.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 4 verses 16 through 18. Paul wrote there, so we do not lose heart, though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. As we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen.

For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. And how about Romans 8, 18? Paul wrote there, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

[27:08] And later in Colossians, we'll see these words in Colossians 3 verse 4. Paul says, when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

That glory will be ours because the Christ who died and rose again to secure it on our behalf lives in us now and forever. We also need to remember this, Christ is not simply the reason we can hope for glory.

Christ is himself that glory. The glory for which we long, the glory for which we've been predestined, the glory that makes all suffering and pain and disappointment in this life unworthy of comparison is the person and presence of Jesus Christ himself.

He is our glory, being with him to know him, to see him and to relish and to rejoice in his beauty is the glory for which all believers hope. So what does Paul do and what should other believers do with the knowledge of this mystery?

Well, the answer comes in verse 28 where Paul says, him, talking about Christ, we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

[28:28] You might not have noticed, but if you count them three times in the Greek text of this verse, Paul referred to everyone. We see that in this translation as well. So clearly he could not rest until all Christians lived up to what God expected.

He had an end times perspective in mind. When he stated that he wants to present everyone, he thought in terms of the return of Jesus and the desire to see each Christian mature in the Lord.

Paul's passion was to proclaim Christ who had done so much for him. And the word translated proclaim means to publicly declare a completed truth or happening. It's a general term not restricted just to formal preaching.

And we see from these verses that Paul's proclamation included two aspects, one a positive one and the other a negative one. The negative one comes first when he talks about warning.

And warning speaks of counsel in view of sin and coming punishment. It's the responsibility of church leaders, but it also is the responsibility of every believer.

[29:37] The positive one comes next, and that is teaching. Teaching refers to imparting positive truth. It too is the responsibility of every believer, and it's part of the great commission, and it also is, of course, the responsibility of church leaders.

Warning and teaching must be done with all wisdom, and wisdom refers to practical discernment, and that means understanding biblical principles for holy conduct.

Paul will explain or expand on these commands when we get to Colossians 3.16, but here's a preview of Colossians 3.16. He said there, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The goal of this ministry is the maturity of the saints, and back in Ephesians for a cross-reference, we see these words in Ephesians 4.11-13.

So here are Ephesians 4.11-13. Paul said, And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

[31:08] So, so far we've seen the characteristics of Paul's ministry and the content of Paul's message. The last thing we'll see tonight, and in chapter 1, is the consistency of Paul's method.

So the consistency of Paul's method is the last piece. And we see that in verse 29. Paul said, For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me.

The term translated struggling, which occurs here and in the next verse that we'll look at next week, was used of athletes who painfully pursued athletic glory.

Paul claimed, though, that his struggle was accompanied by God's energy, which in turn energized him. So using that athletic imagery, Paul looked forward to the day of the second coming, realizing that his goal was to present mature Gentile Christians to the Lord at that time.

And if this were to be accomplished, it would be done through the power of Christ, which effectively worked in Paul in spite of the stresses that he faced in this life. And all his toil and labor would have been useless apart from God's power in his life.

[32 : 25] And Paul certainly realized that. To the Corinthians, he wrote these words in 1 Corinthians 15.10. He said, 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. So God gave Paul the strength to work hard at his ministry.

And Galatians 2.20 that we're familiar with really sums up the two components of this human-divine interaction. Galatians 2.20 says, 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.

The secret of Paul's success was not his education, his cultural heritage, his servant techniques, or even the appeal of his personality. His secret was God's power working in him.

[33 : 30] God's power is not designed to eliminate our responsibility to work hard, but it's designed to enable us to fulfill that responsibility. And here's a quote from J.I. Packer, and he said it like this, The Holy Spirit's ordinary way of working in us through the working of our own minds and wills.

He moves us to act by causing us to see reasons for moving ourselves to act. Thus, our conscious, rational selfhood, far from being annihilated, is strengthened, and in reverent, resolute obedience, we work out our salvation, knowing that God is at work in us to make us both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

So it's interesting to think of it, isn't it, to say that the Holy Spirit's ordinary way of working is through the working of our own minds and wills. He moves us to act by seeing the reasons for motivating ourselves to act.

Christ. We know from other biblical texts that the infinite energy of the Godhead upholds and sustains and directs the world.

In Christ, says Paul, all things hold together. We saw that in Colossians 1.17. And we looked at this cross-reference a couple weeks ago in Acts 17.28.

[34 : 50] Paul said, in him we live and move and have our being. But here in Colossians 1.29, we see a unique manifestation of divine energy.

In one sense, the divine energy sustained Paul's existence and was alone responsible for his life and breath. But in another sense, the divine energy is focused and later-like to empower him in his daily ministry.

So that is why Paul can be so consistent in his method. At the beginning of the lesson, we talked about how Paul wants the Colossians and us to understand that the gospel is the most powerful force on earth.

Contrary to what the false teachers would have the Colossians and us believe, Paul has shown how his suffering and the suffering of other Christians demonstrates the power of God. God used that suffering and continues to use that suffering to draw Gentiles to himself.

One of the earlier cross-references we looked at tonight was part of 2 Corinthians 1-5. But I want to close by looking at 2 Corinthians 1-5 through 7 together so that you get the full picture.

[36 : 01] Paul said, As we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation.

And if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.

With that, let's close in prayer. Father, we thank you for the reminder in these verses that no matter how bad our circumstances may seem at one time or another, you are always working those circumstances for your purpose, and those circumstances are part of your plan.

Help us to trust that as we go through difficult times in life, and help us to use what we learn to guide others through difficult times as well. We thank you for the examples that we see in your word.

Help us internalize them and carry out our lives to show everyone that we believe them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.
[37:15] Amen.