

Paul's Letter to the Colossians Study

Bible Study Session 06 Colossians 1:24-29 : Topic 4.1 "The Mystery Revealed"

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Greek NT

24 Νῦν χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, καὶ ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκκλησία, 25 ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, 26 τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν,— νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἀγίοις αὐτοῦ, 27 οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης· 28 ὃν ἡμεῖς καταγγέλλομεν νοθετοῦντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον καὶ διδάσκοντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ, ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ· 29 εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

24 Ich freue mich, dass ich jetzt für euch leiden darf. An den Leiden von Christus würde noch etwas fehlen, wenn ich sie nicht durch das, was ich selbst körperlich leide, ergänzen würde – seinem Leib zugute, der Gemeinde. 25 Zu ihrem Dienst bin ich bestellt durch das Amt, das Gott mir zu eurem Besten übertragen hat.

Seine Botschaft soll ich überall verbreiten. 26 Ich soll das Geheimnis enthüllen, das er seit Urzeiten allen Generationen verborgen gehalten hatte, jetzt aber denen offenbart hat, die er in seine Gemeinschaft rief. 27 Ihnen wollte er zeigen, welch herrlichen Reichtum dieses Geheimnis für euch, die nichtjüdischen Völker, in sich birgt: Christus mitten unter euch, gerade euch! Das bedeutet die sichere Hoffnung, dass Gott euch Anteil gibt an seiner Herrlichkeit!

28 Diesen Christus verkünden wir. Und wir hören nicht auf, jeden Einzelnen in der Gemeinde zu ermahnen und jedem Einzelnen in der Gemeinde den Weg zu zeigen, den uns Christus gewiesen hat. Das tun wir mit der ganzen Weisheit, die uns gegeben ist. Denn wir möchten jeden und jede in der Gemeinde dahin bringen, dass sie vor Gott dastehen in der Vollkommenheit, die aus der Verbindung mit Christus erwächst.

29 Eben dafür kämpfe ich und mühe mich ab, und Christus selbst wirkt durch mich mit seiner Kraft, die sich in mir als mächtig erweist.

NRSV

24 I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. 25 I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 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. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

NLT

24 I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am completing what remains of Christ's sufferings for his body, the church. 25 God has given me the responsibility of serving his church by proclaiming his message in all its fullness to you Gentiles. 26 This message was kept secret for centuries and generations past, but now it has been revealed to his own holy people. 27 For it has pleased God to tell his people that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. For this is the secret: Christ lives in you, and this is your assurance that you will share in his glory. 28 So everywhere we go, we tell everyone about Christ. We warn them and teach them with all the wisdom God has given us, for we want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. 29 I work very hard at this, as I depend on Christ's mighty power that works within me.

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The Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

With this passage we begin a two part study of Paul's ministry that is presented in 1:24-29 and 2:1-5. The focus on the first text is on Paul's struggles to minister in behalf of the Colossians. The gospel is a mystery that has now been disclosed to God's people. The second text emphasizes Paul's longing for the churches that he did not know personally, in particular the Colossians, Laodiceans and others. The emphasis upon the Gospel as mystery continues. From these texts we gain insight into the nature of gospel ministry as Paul experienced it. Out of this should come better understanding of the calling upon every minister of the gospel to serve Christ.

Historical Context:

External History. In the history of the copying of the Greek text in verses 24-29, no variation in wording surfaces that the editors of *The Greek New Testament* (4th rev. edition) felt important enough for translation so as to list them. Thus no alternative readings are listed in the text apparatus of this printed Greek New Testament.



However, in the *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th rev. edition) seven places are listed where variation in wording does surface when comparing the existing manuscript copies.² But as we have seen previously these variations are stylistic in nature as efforts to clarify meaning and improve style of writing by later copyists. None of them alters the meaning of the text. Consequently we can analyze the above text in full confidence that it reflects the words that Timothy wrote down from Paul's dictation of this letter.



Internal History. The duration of Paul's ministry from his conversion / calling in AD 33 to the writing of this letter about AD 58 is the historical scope of this passage. His stress is on the beginning and ending points, with hardly any reference to the between years. In other places he provides more details of these years,³ in addition to the summary description of Paul's ministry by Luke in Acts chapters 9, 13-28. Several

¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²Kolossier 1,24

* μου κ² 075. 81. 323. 326. 629. 1241^s. 1505. 2464 *pc* t *vg*^{ms} *sy*^h; Chr (μου is inserted after παθήμασιν)

Kolossier 1,27

* P⁴⁶ (τῆς δόξης is omitted by this manuscript)

* του θεου D* F G b *vg*^{ms}; Ambst (τούτου is replaced by τοῦ θεοῦ)

| του κ*

* † ος κ C D H I Ψ 075. 0278 *M* (ὄ is replaced by ὄς)

| txt P⁴⁶ A B F G P 33. 1739. 1881 *pc* lat^t

Kolossier 1,28

* D* F G 0278. 33. 614. 629 *pc* it *vg*^{ms} (*syp*); Cl Ambst (L 81. 1241^s. 1505 *pc*: *h.t.* (πάντα ἄνθρωπον is omitted)

* Ιησου κ² D² H Ψ 075. 0278 *M* lat *sy*^(p) sa *bo*^{ms} (Ιησοῦ is added to Χριστῷ)

| txt P⁴⁶ κ* A B C D* F G 33. 81. 1241^s. 1739. 1881. 2464 *pc* b m* *vg*^{ms} *bo*; Cl Ambst

[Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27. Aufl., rev. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1993), 525.]

³One of the more detailed descriptions is found in 2 Corinthians 11:24-33, written in the mid-50s:

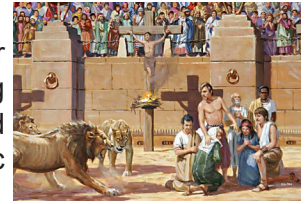
2 Cor. 11:24-33 (NRSV): 24 Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. 28 And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant? 30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus (blessed be he forever!) knows that I do not lie. 32 In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

Other references include 2 Cor. 1:3-11; 4:7-12.

2 Cor. 1:3-11 (NRSV): 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, 4 who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is

times he will reflect back on his ministry in the city where the church is to whom he is writing.⁴ When viewed together as a depiction of almost three decades of gospel ministry, the picture that emerges from these texts is challenging, to say the least. The idea of being a pastor, a missionary, or in other service in Christian ministry set forth here is not that often painted by Christian leaders today.

This is certainly not the picture of today's TV preacher traveling around in his or her personal jet from preaching engagement to preaching engagement, and staying in the finest hotel rooms while in each location!⁵ The apostle Paul would be outraged were it possible for him to know how many modern day preachers live. Authentic gospel ministry includes suffering and hardships! There's no getting around it!



Fortunately, authentic gospel ministry also includes unbelievable blessings from God, primarily of a spiritual nature. In Paul's expressions of personal thanksgiving, he tends to focus upon his relationship with Jesus, rather than on the ministry God had given him. But in a couple of places we can see some insight into his feeling about ministry that provides a backdrop to our text here.

In Philippians (4:10-20), which was written a year or so after Colossians from Rome, Paul reflects on his sense of satisfaction in whatever material circumstance he found himself in. This is prompted by a love offering brought to him in Rome from the church at Philippi by Epaphroditus:

10 I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. 11 Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 12 I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me. 14 In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. 15 You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. 16 For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. 18 I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Later on after being released from Roman imprisonment and before being re-arrested and taken back to Rome, Paul expresses profound gratitude for God's calling to ministry; 1 Tim. 1:12-17:

12 I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. 16 But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. 17 To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory

abundant through Christ. 6 If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation. 8 We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. 9 Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. 10 He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again, 11 as you also join in helping us by your prayers, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.

2 Cor. 4:7-12 (NRSV): 7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. 11 For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. 12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

⁴Cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-4:14; 2 Cor. 1:8-4:18; Gal. 1:10-2:21; 1 Thess. 2:1-3:13. Typically, a focus on ministry in general will contain references to his ministry among his readers prior to the writing of the letter.

⁵Nor is it the picture of ministry found among many of the 'mega-church' pastors whose salary reaches or surpasses a million US dollars annually. In spite of many claims, none of these can say truthfully with the Apostle Peter (Acts 3:6, NRSV): "But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.'"

forever and ever. Amen.

At the very end of his life, while writing to Timothy Paul reflects on his ministry as he awaits trial again before Emperor Nero in the mid 60s; cf. 2 Tim. 1:8-18:⁶

8 Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, *but join with me in suffering for the gospel*, relying on the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 *For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher*, 12 *and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him.* 13 Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. 15 *You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes.* 16 May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain; 17 when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me 18 — may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus.

No where in Paul's writings will one find a romanticized portrayal of Christian ministry. It brought him no personal glory, no personal wealth, no power over people, no prominence in society -- absolutely nothing that modern men often seek in life. Christian ministry is no place for egotists and offers nothing that this world promises. The esteem and reverence that Christians have given to the apostle Paul over the centuries is 'post facto,' that is, this developed long after Paul's death. For the apostle the sense of doing God's will was the blessing from the Heaven Father that he sought. Nothing else mattered; certainly not the things typically valued by this world.

Our passage then stands in this pattern of personal reflection on ministry, and contains many insights typical of the others but also several that are distinctive to Colossians.

Literary Aspects:

The literary aspects of Col. 1:24-29 play a helpful role in the interpretive process. Thus it is important to give careful consideration to them.

Literary Form: By 1:24, we have the beginning of the letter body, and perhaps earlier than this.⁷ As mentioned in previous studies in Colossians, the broad genre of 'letter' signals the occasional nature of the contents. Paul touches on his ministry out of a concern produced from the report received from Epaphras (cf. 1:8) when he arrived at Caesarea where Paul was under Roman arrest. This has occasioned various assessments regarding the false teaching and teachers at Colossae that Paul will oppose later in the letter (cf. esp. 2:8ff.). Whether 1:24-2:5 should be considered a 'defense of Paul's ministry' or not is questionable. The text does not contain 'apologetic' tones, such as are found in Gal. 1:10-2:21 or 2 Cor. 10-13, which are clearly defenses of his ministry. The surrounding context, especially 1:8, suggests a sharing of one's ministry with people deeply caring for the apostle.

At the small genre level, Col. 1:24-29 should be considered as a personal narrative reflecting back on the apostle's understanding of the nature of his ministry to the Colossians largely in theological terms. Such narratives in Paul's writings are autobiographical, since the apostle is describing his own experience rather than someone else describing it. But throughout the writings of Paul these texts do not take on an established form and pattern so that they can be labeled as a distinct genre.

Literary Setting: As the below outline highlights, Col. 1:24-29 represents clearly the letter body, which has most likely begun earlier, perhaps as early as 1:9. The transitioning from Proem to letter Body takes

⁶Similar is 2 Tim. 2:8-10 (NRSV): "8 Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David — that is my gospel, 9 for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. 10 Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory."

⁷This is contrary to a few commentators who see the body of the letter beginning with either 2:6 or 2:8. Virtually all of these commentators also reflect little training or skills in literary critical analysis. Consequently their mostly undefended claims have little credibility.

Outline of Colossians

Praescriptio

Introduction: 1:1-2
 Superscriptio: 1:1
 Adscriptio: 1:2a
 Salutatio: 1:2b

Proem

Thankfulness: 1:3-8

Body

Intercession: 1:9-12
 Christus Hymnus: 1:13-20
 Reconciliation: 1:21-23

Paul's Ministry 1: 1:24-29
 Paul's Ministry 2: 2:1-5

Christian Living 1: 2:6-15
 Christian Living 2: 2:16-19

Christian Legalism: 2:20-23
 Seeking the Heavenly Things: 3:1-4
 Christian Behavior: 3:5-11
 Getting Dressed: 3:12-17

Haustafeln: 3:18-4:1
 Husband/Wife: 3:18-19
 Father/Children: 3:20-21
 Master/Slaves: 3:22-4:1

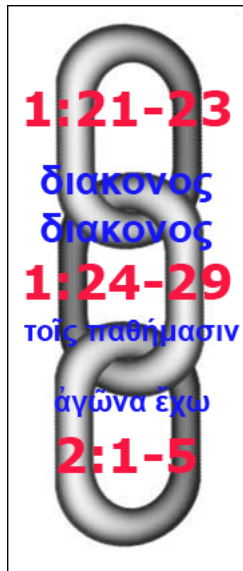
Admonitions and Requests: 4:2-6

Conclusio

Tychicus: 4:7-9
 Greetings: 4:10-17
 Closing: 4:18
 Letter Validation: 4:18a
 Prayer Request: 4:18b
 Benedictio: 4:19c

place in 1:9-23 and is achieved clearly by 1:24.

But equally important is the way 1:24-29 is linked to 1:21-23 and 2:1-5, as a continuation of themes and topics. The concluding assertion of Paul in 1:23, "I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel," (τοῦ εὐαγγελίου..., οὗ ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ Παῦλος διάκονος) becomes the launch pad for 1:24-29. In 1:25, Paul will see himself also as a servant of the church (ἡ ἐκκλησία, ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος). Thus 1:24-29 is linked to 1:21-23 closely with the image of Paul



being a servant. Additionally the 'church' (ἡ ἐκκλησία) is mentioned in 1:18 and in 1:25 given further linkage to the preceding material reaching back into 1:15-20. Of course, Christ is mentioned in all three texts, along with 'gospel' in 1:21-23 and 1:24-29. The statement of ministry goal in 1:28, "so that we may present everyone mature in Christ," (ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ) corresponds to his earlier expressed prayer goal for the Colossians in 1:10, "so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." Clearly 1:24-29 continues many of the ideas, and builds upon these ideas, that were presented earlier to the Colossians.

Then 1:24-29 is closely linked to 2:1-5 as well, with both being depictions of Paul's ministry. Most importantly the theme of 'suffering' links the two passages: 1:24, "in my sufferings," ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν and 2:1, "I am struggling" (ἡλίκον ἀγῶνα ἔχω), even though they are different but still related concepts. Most importantly the theme of 'mystery' (τὸ μυστήριον) links these two passages. The qualifying terms added to the word in both texts⁸ form a critical context for understanding Paul's idea. The common first person narrative perspective between the two texts further binds the two texts together.

Thus in the pattern established beginning in 1:3, each pericope is 'linked' to the successive one by either 'headers' or also by repeated words and concepts. Yet, each passage advances the thought flow forward with new ideas. This is certainly the case in 1:24-29.

Literary Structure: The block diagram of the original Greek text visually highlights the thought flow inside the passage, and is reflected in the rather literalistic English translation below.

1.24 Now
 8 I am rejoicing
 in my sufferings
 in your behalf,
 and
 9 I am filling up the missing things
 of the afflictions of Christ
 in my flesh
 in behalf of His body,
 which is the church,
 1.25 of which I have become a slave,
 /-----|
 according to the administration
 of God
 which was given to me
 for you
 in order to make full the Word of God,
 -----|

⁸Col. 1:25b-26 (NRSV): "to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints."
 Col. 2:2b-3 (NRSV): "the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

1.26 which is the mystery,
that has been hidden
from the ages,
and
from the generations,
but
now
has been revealed
to His saints,
/-----|

1.27 to whom God desired to make known,
What are the riches,
of the glory
of this mystery
/-----|
among the Gentiles,
/-----|

1.28 which is Christ in you,
the hope of glory;
whom we proclaim
warning every person
and
teaching every person
with full wisdom
in order to present every person
mature

1.29 and
for which I labor
agnozing
in regard to the energizing
in me
with power.

This single sentence in the Greek text makes two core declarations (#s 8 and 9): “I rejoice” (χαίρω) and “I fill up” (ἀνταναπληρῶ). Both are conceptually connected to one another as attitude and action. Paul talks often in his letters about rejoicing. And, although strange sounding to modern readers, he speaks about rejoicing in suffering. The second verb, ἀνταναπληρῶ, is found only here in all of the New Testament, but is part of a set of verbs with the root stem of πληρῶ. The construction, “I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ), is even more puzzling to modern ears. But off this basic affirmation come all the expansion elements in vv. 24b-29. When taken as a whole, the expression becomes more understandable. Christ, His body the church, and the service of Paul to the church are all inner connected by Paul’s sufferings and Christ’s suffering.

Exegesis of the Text:

Paul speaks of ministry here, but in ways we are not accustomed to hearing from modern pulpits. This text is somewhat paralleled by the similar declaration in Ephesians 3:1-14 (NRSV):

1 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him. 13 I pray therefore that you may not lose heart over my sufferings for you; they are your glory.

3.1 Τούτου χάριν ἐγὼ Παῦλος ὁ δέσμιος τοῦ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν τῶν ἐθνῶν — 2 εἴ γε ἠκούσατε

τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς· 3 κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν ἐγνωρίσθη μοι τὸ μυστήριον, καθὼς προέγραψα ἐν ὀλίγῳ, 4 πρὸς ὃ δύνασθε ἀναγινώσκοντες νοῆσαι τὴν σύνεσίν μου ἐν τῷ μυστηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 5 ὃ ἐτέραις γενεαῖς οὐκ ἐγνωρίσθη τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ὡς νῦν ἀπεκαλύφθη τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀποστόλοις αὐτοῦ καὶ προφήταις ἐν πνεύματι, 6 εἶναι τὰ ἔθνη συγκληρονόμα καὶ σύσσωμα καὶ συμμετόχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ διὰ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, 7 οὗ ἐγενήθη διάκονος κατὰ τὴν δωρεάν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ — 8 ἐμοὶ τῷ ἐλαχιστοτέρῳ πάντων ἁγίων ἐδόθη ἡ χάρις αὕτη — τοῖς ἔθνεσιν εὐαγγελισασθαι τὸ ἀνεξιχνίαστον πλοῦτος τοῦ Χριστοῦ, 9 καὶ φωτίσαι πάντας τίς ἡ οἰκονομία τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ ἀποκεκρυμμένου ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων ἐν τῷ θεῷ τῷ τὰ πάντα κτίσαντι, 10 ἵνα γνωρισθῇ νῦν ταῖς ἀρχαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἐξουσίαις ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἡ πολυποίκιλος σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ, 11 κατὰ πρόθεσιν τῶν αἰώνων ἣν ἐποίησεν ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τῷ κυρίῳ ἡμῶν, 12 ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν παρρησίαν καὶ προσαγωγὴν ἐν πεποιθήσει διὰ τῆς πίστεως αὐτοῦ. 13 διὸ αἰτοῦμαι μὴ ἐγκακεῖν ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσίν μου ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, ἥτις ἐστὶν δόξα ὑμῶν.

Many commentators focus on the theme of mystery and making the mystery known as signals of Paul reacting to a budding gnosticism in the Christian community at Colossae, and perhaps at Ephesus as well.⁹ If this is the case, the allusions are very obscure and no firm conclusions about the false teaching at Colossae can be deduced from this text, and even less from the Ephesians text. The metaphorical language of Paul here can be accounted for in other ways, than as anti-Gnostic polemic.

Ministry revolves around two key terms in the passage, notably v. 25: *διάκονος*, and *τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ*. The historical background and inner-connectedness of these two terms presents a clear picture, although culturally unknown in our western society. One of the meanings for *διάκονος* in the ancient world was ‘slave.’ Although it is possible to refer to different types of slaves by this word, one of its most common designations was to specify the household slaves who were responsible for preparing and serving the food in the household. The second term, *οἰκονομία*, (lit., ‘the law of the house’) designated the authoritative instructions given to the various slaves by the chief slave, ὁ οἰκονόμος, who answered only to the master of the house. This slave was literally the ‘law of the house’ and had authority over all the other slaves, and sometimes even over the children of the master of the house.

Paul saw his ministry as a slave of God serving spiritual nourishment under the instructions from God Himself, who had absolute authority in the household. God mapped out these instructions to Paul and commissioned him to carry them out, particularly here, in serving spiritual nourishment to the church. This nourishment was intended to grow them into spiritual adults (cf. v. 28b, “so that we may present everyone mature in Christ,” ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ).

But this ministry had distinctive traits that centered around suffering.

Paul’s ministry of rejoicing in suffering, v. 24a: “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake” (Νῦν χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν).

Joy and suffering are strange companions in western culture. About the only way we link them is with joy in watching our enemies suffer. But the world of Paul was not modern western culture. Early on in Paul’s ministry he had come to realize the potential value of suffering hardships in the service of God. In the middle of his career he wrote to the Romans (5:3-5, NRSV):

And not only that, but ***we also boast in our sufferings***, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

3 οὐ μόνον δέ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ***καυχώμεθα ἐν ταῖς θλίψεσιν***, εἰδότες ὅτι ἡ θλίψις ὑπομονὴν κατεργάζεται, 4 ἡ δὲ ὑπομονὴ δοκιμὴν, ἡ δὲ δοκιμὴ ἐλπίδα. 5 ἡ δὲ ἐλπίς οὐ κατασχύνει· ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ ἐκκέχυται ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ἡμῶν διὰ πνεύματος ἁγίου τοῦ δοθέντος ἡμῖν.

He saw the spiritual growth opportunity coming out of suffering, and found good in this. During this same period of his ministry when Romans was written, he also observed the same thing in the Proem of his letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:3-7, NRSV):

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, 4 who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the

⁹One should not forget that Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon came as a “package” to these churches from Ephesus eastward to the Lycus Valley where Colossae was located. All three letters were to be read in these churches.

consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. 6 If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

3 Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ πατὴρ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν καὶ θεὸς πάσης παρακλήσεως, 4 ὁ παρακαλῶν ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ θλίψει ἡμῶν, εἰς τὸ δύνασθαι ἡμᾶς παρακαλεῖν τοὺς ἐν πάσῃ θλίψει διὰ τῆς παρακλήσεως ἧς παρακαλούμεθα αὐτοὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ. 5 ὅτι καθὼς περισσεύει τὰ παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς, οὕτως διὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ περισσεύει καὶ ἡ παράκλησις ἡμῶν. 6 εἴτε δὲ θλιβόμεθα, ὑπὲρ τῆς ὑμῶν παρακλήσεως καὶ σωτηρίας· εἴτε παρακαλούμεθα, ὑπὲρ τῆς ὑμῶν παρακλήσεως τῆς ἐνεργουμένης ἐν ὑπομονῇ τῶν αὐτῶν παθημάτων ὧν καὶ ἡμεῖς πάσχομεν, 7 καὶ ἡ ἐλπίς ἡμῶν βεβαία ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· εἰδότες ὅτι ὡς κοινωνοὶ ἐστέ τῶν παθημάτων, οὕτως καὶ τῆς παρακλήσεως.

But also he came to understand that suffering coming out of ministry possessed benefit not just to him personally, but also for those he sought to help. The model was Christ and His suffering for the benefit of others. To the Corinthians he realized that his sufferings brought them encouragement (παρακλήσις) to be willing to endure afflictions as well. Toward the end of his ministry he would reflect to the Philippians his deep longing to become more fully a ‘participant’ in the sufferings of Christ (Phil. 3:10-11, NRSV): “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead,” τοῦ γινῶναι αὐτὸν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν τῆς ἀναστάσεως αὐτοῦ καὶ κοινωνίαν παθημάτων αὐτοῦ, συμμορφιζόμενος τῷ θανάτῳ αὐτοῦ, 11 εἴ πως καταστήσω εἰς τὴν ἐξανάστασιν τὴν ἐκ νεκρῶν. He saw in Christ’s suffering and death an absolutely total commitment to the will of God, and deeply longed to experience this in his life as well.

Interestingly, with the Colossians he speaks of sufferings in their behalf, even though he had never been to Colossae and did not know the church personally (cf. Col 2:1). How could this be? His current imprisonment by the Roman authorities provided the occasion of his current sufferings at the time of the writing of the letter. He was in jail for having preached Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 21:17-26:32). The Jewish religious leadership violently rejected this ministry in Jerusalem and sought his execution by the Romans. They traveled from Jerusalem as far as Caesarea Philippi, the Roman military headquarters for the eastern Mediterranean, in order to press their false charges against Paul (cf. Acts 24:1-9). Paul’s sufferings had nothing directly to do with the Colossians, since they were not based on any actions that he had done in Colossae. Yet Paul saw his sufferings in Caesarea Philippi as ‘in behalf of’ the Colossians (ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν). The benefit to the Colossians stems out of an encouraging example that Paul was providing them. If they found reason to be faithful to Christ in their own sufferings from the example of Paul, this was occasion for Paul to rejoice in his sufferings.

Not everyone interpreted Paul’s sufferings in such a positive manner in the ancient world. Several in the church at Corinth had another view, as 2 Cor. 10:9-12 describes.¹⁰ Paul’s Judaizing opponents in the churches of Galatia did not view suffering as having any positive ministry value, as Gal. 6:12 asserts.¹¹ This raises a serious question in our contemporary world: when we ‘run from’ suffering for Christ, do we stand with Paul or with the false teachers who opposed him? Could our feelings about sufferings reflect seriously upon the level of our spiritual maturity? Paul came to understand a deep spiritual principle at work in suffering, and this brought him great joy to realize how God was using his sufferings to advance the gospel message of Christ.

Paul’s ministry of suffering completing Christ’s suffering, vv. 24b-29: “and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. 25 I became its servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26 the mystery that has been

¹⁰“9 I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. 10 For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.” 11 Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present. 12 We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense.” As 2 Cor. 11:28-30 suggests, these enemies of Paul at Corinth saw his sufferings as casting doubt on the legitimacy of his apostleship; “God wasn’t taking care of Paul by allowing him to suffer,” they asserted, and thus Paul’s ministry wasn’t truly from God. This because -- in their twisted view -- God protects His own people from suffering.

¹¹“It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised — only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”

hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 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. 28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.”

(1.24b καὶ ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκκλησία, 25 ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, 26 τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν, — νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, 27 οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης· 28 ὃν ἡμεῖς καταγγέλλομεν νουθετοῦντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον καὶ διδάσκοντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ, ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ· 29 εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει.)

The next level of comprehension of the spiritual value of sufferings in ministry is affirmed in vv. 24b-29. The core expression is the most challenging part: “I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (καὶ ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκκλησία). The verb / object combination, ‘complete deficiencies’ (ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα), seems to imply something lacking in the suffering of Christ. Yet, in the *Christus Hymnus* earlier in 1:15-20 the completeness of Christ’s redemptive work is not only affirmed but enthusiastically celebrated.¹² Clearly nothing inadequate about the salvation work of Christ on the cross is present, and nothing needs to be supplemented by human action.

So what is Paul talking about here? For the last nearly two thousand years of interpretive history, the answer to this question has been debated among scholars.¹³ The solution seems to lie in the realm of ancient

¹²“15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

15 ὃς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, 16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα, εἴτε θρόνοι εἴτε κυριότητες εἴτε ἀρχαὶ εἴτε ἐξουσίαι· τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἐκτίσται· 17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων καὶ τὰ πάντα ἐν αὐτῷ συνέστηκεν, 18 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν ἡ κεφαλὴ τοῦ σώματος τῆς ἐκκλησίας· ὃς ἐστὶν ἀρχή, πρωτότοκος ἐκ τῶν νεκρῶν, ἵνα γένηται ἐν πᾶσιν αὐτὸς πρωτεύων, 19 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι 20 καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι’ αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς·

¹³Peter O’Brien (*Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 44: 80–86 provides a summary of this history:

τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ. The Greek may be rendered by “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions,” and the following are some of the more significant interpretations (cf Kremer, *Leiden Christi*) that have been suggested:

(1) H. Windisch (*Paulus und Christus. Ein biblisch-religionsgeschichtlicher Vergleich*. [Leipzig: Heinrich, 1934] 236–50) took the phrase to mean that there was still something lacking in the vicarious sufferings of Christ which must be supplied by the apostle. Paul bore away the sufferings “which Christ could not carry away completely” (244). This view has been largely abandoned by recent scholars, and with good reasons. Paul, like the other NT writers, regarded the death of Jesus as the means by which reconciliation was truly and uniquely accomplished. To go no further than Colossians itself Paul states that because of Christ’s death on the cross all our trespasses have been forgiven (2:13, 14; cf 1:12–14, 19–22). In addition to this, it has been correctly pointed out by Staab, Schweizer and others that nowhere else in the NT is the phrase “Christ’s afflictions” used of his redemptive act or general experience of suffering. Instead, Paul uses the concepts “blood,” “cross” and “death” to refer to that act of redemption.

(2) A popular view in seventeenth and eighteenth century Protestant interpretation was to understand the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ as objective (or as a *genitivus auctoris*) so that the phrase meant suffering “for the sake of Christ.” It was argued that this was consistent with Pauline thought (cf 2 Cor 4:10, 11), while Acts 9:16 records how much Paul will suffer for the sake of Christ’s name. So, with this perspective, the exegetical difficulties are said to disappear. Paul is not speaking of completing or filling up the sufferings of Jesus; instead, he is suffering for Christ’s sake. The difficulty with this approach, however, is that it does not really explain the phrase “what is lacking” (τὰ ὑστερήματα), nor does it indicate how the apostle can “fill up” these sufferings.

(3) Another line of approach that was popular among some early interpreters was to understand τοῦ Χριστοῦ as a genitive of quality referring to the sufferings of Paul “which resemble those of Christ.” Greek commentators such as Photius and Theodoret adopted this line as did Pelagius on the Latin side, and it appears to have been revived during the nineteenth century by Meyer, von Soden and Abbott. Paul’s sufferings were similar to the distresses experienced by Christ; Christ’s afflictions “are regarded as the

type of all those that are endured by His followers on behalf of the church (Abbott, 232). But again it may be asked: In what sense can one meaningfully speak of a lack in Christ's afflictions, and how is Paul able to remedy such a deficiency?

(4) A fourth approach which has been very influential in times past is the Christ-mysticism view. All that Paul does and suffers happens in mystical union with Christ (cf Gal 2:20). The "afflictions of Christ" are those sufferings experienced in mystical fellowship with him. Deissmann and Schmid, two exponents of this theory, held that the words applied to Paul alone, while Schneider and Dibelius thought they referred to the whole church. Advocates of the Christ-mysticism approach considered that Paul could write in this way without bringing into question or reducing the suffering of Christ on earth. This mystic union with Christ in his dying and resurrection (supposedly supported by Phil 3:10) in some way or other conferred a benefit on the church. Lohmeyer's criticisms (76–79; cf Percy, *Probleme*, 128–34) of this view, however, are still trenchant. He finds difficulty with the word ὑστερήματα ("what is lacking") claiming that in "a 'mystical suffering in accordance with Christ' either the entire suffering of Christ is present and 'what is lacking' is never perceptible, or else the personal suffering of faith remains separate from the exemplary sufferings of Christ" (Lohmeyer, 77; cf Lohse, 69, 70). In other words, it seems incomprehensible how, in the light of this intimate communion of suffering, there could be a measure of afflictions which still lacked something.

(5) Clearly any satisfactory explanation of the passage (as Best, *Body*, 136, notes) must take the words τὰ ὑστερήματα seriously without suggesting that Christ's sufferings were insufficient to redeem, and explain why Paul's sufferings can be linked with those of the Messiah, at the same time indicating why he should rejoice in his sufferings for the sake of Colossians. Several scholars (including Best, *Body*, 136, Moule, 76, Lohse, 70–72, Martin, NCB, 70, and Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 82–94; note, however, the criticisms of Ernst, 184, 185) consider a more fruitful line of inquiry into the meaning of "Christ's afflictions" is the OT and Jewish background with its apocalyptic conception of the afflictions of the end time, the woes of the Messiah. The presence of the definite article "the afflictions of Christ" (τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ) suggests a definite or well-known entity such as the birth-pangs of the Messiah (cf Kremer, *Leiden Christi*, 168). Since the immediate context contains references to other concepts which have an apocalyptic ring (the mystery previously hidden but now revealed, v 26; "the riches of the glory of this mystery," v 27; "God's mystery," 2:2; and "in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden," 2:3) it is considered that the attempt to find such associations in this disputed phrase is appropriate.

The term θηΐψις ("affliction") which stands in the LXX for several Hebrew terms that more or less denote the distresses of life in various nuances gained its theological significance from the fact that it predominantly signified "the oppression and affliction of the people of Israel or of the righteous who represent Israel" (Schlier, *TDNT* 3, 142; cf Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 84). Israel constantly experienced "affliction" (θηΐψις) in its history, for example, the oppression in Egypt and the affliction of the exile, both important events of salvation history (Exod 4:31; Deut 4:29; 28:47–68; Judg 6:9; 10:6–16; 1 Sam 10:18, 19; 2 Kings 19:3), while the righteous in Israel, according to the Psalms, were afflicted too (Pss 9:10; 12:5; 22:5; 31:7; 33:7, 18, etc). In addition to this continual visitation of the chosen people by God, according to Daniel 12:1 there belongs also a future ἡμέρα θλίψεως ("There is going to be a time of *great distress*, unparalleled since nations first came into existence," J^b; cf Hab 3:16; Zeph 1:15). So Schlier (*TDNT* 3, 142) concludes: "The judgment fulfilled in the history of Israel will be totally revealed in the eschatological θηΐψις."

Jewish apocalyptic writing, with its doctrine of the two ages ("the present age" and "the coming age"), frequently pictured the disasters and catastrophes coming upon the world (cf Dan 12:1) as a prelude to the end-time which would usher in the coming anointed ruler of God. Plagues, war, famine and the like will fall upon mankind, and even God's people will be called upon to suffer (for examples see Str-B 4, 977–86). When these horrors and cosmic disorders reach their climax, their appointed limit, the advent will come. The afflictions of these last days are called the "woes of the Messiah" (Hebrew *hebe'elô šel Māšivah* = ἡ ὥδιν τοῦ Χριστοῦ [cf Matt 24:8; Mark 13:8; Paul's expression αἱ θλίψεις τοῦ Χριστοῦ, "the afflictions of the Christ/Messiah," is synonymous and equivalent) as they immediately precede the arrival of the anointed ruler of God. They are the travail out of which the messianic age is born. God has set a limit to these sufferings, prescribing a definite measure for the afflictions which the righteous and the martyrs must endure (1 Enoch 47:1–4; 2 Baruch 30:2).

The NT's teaching concerning the end-time is not unrelated to these Jewish apocalyptic conceptions. God has set the measure and extent of these afflictions, thereby limiting them (Mark 13:19–24 and parallels). However, the NT significantly modifies this apocalyptic concept of the messianic woes: (a) it is not some unknown figure who will appear at the advent: it will be the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven who is none other than the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. The sorrows to be endured will usher in his glorious appearing for judgment and salvation. (b) With the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ the "coming age" has been inaugurated. The present age continues so that Christians live in the overlap of the two aeons. The woes of the Messiah, the afflictions of Christ, have already begun and when their appointed limit has been reached the coming age will be consummated and this present evil age will pass away.

All Christians participate in these sufferings; through them they enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; cf 1 Thess 3:3, 7). Suffering with Christ is a necessary prerequisite to being glorified with him (Rom 8:17, εἴπερ συμπάσχομεν ἵνα καὶ συνδοξασθεῶμεν). But none of these afflictions is able to separate the believer from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:38, 39). They ultimately lead to hope and glory (Rom 5:3), and there is the assurance given that such afflictions of the present time (Rom 8:18, τὰ παυθήματα τοῦ νῦν καιροῦ) are not worth comparing with that glory to be revealed.

ἀναναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα ... The term ὑστερήμα ("need," "want," "deficiency," BAG, 849; cf Wilkens, *TDNT* 8, 592–601) was used of the absence of a person to whom one is attached (1 Cor 16:7; Phil 2:30), and of a deficiency in a specific situation (1

Jewish corporate thinking, rather than in individualized thinking present in our western world. Additionally, the concept of Messianic woes, that developed in intertestamental Judaism, provides some background insight. The conviction was that Israel would go through tribulations in connection with the coming of the Messiah, and when these had been completed the Messiah would appear. To be clear, the term for sufferings by Christ used here, τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ, is never used in the New Testament in relationship to Christ's redemptive work on the cross. Thus what Christ experienced on the cross is not in Paul's mind here. More likely something akin to what the risen Christ said to Paul on the Damascus road is in mind here; Acts 9:4-5 (NRSV):

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

4 καὶ πεσὼν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἤκουσεν φωνὴν λέγουσαν αὐτῷ Σαοὺλ Σαοὺλ, τί με διώκεις; 5 εἶπεν δέ· Τίς εἶ, κύριε; ὁ δέ· Ἐγὼ εἰμι Ἰησοῦς ὃν σὺ διώκεις·

The risen Christ was so identified with His church that persecution of them was persecution of Him, and He felt the pain and suffering they were experiencing. Paul came to realize after coming into the church that such pain and suffering by believers was deeply connected to Christ feeling pain and suffering. That pain and suffering were the lot of believers was a given; the people of God will suffer affliction. But in that Christ experiences affliction also. Such was the way to Christian maturity and for most the path to entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus Paul's physical (ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου) sufferings (τοῖς παθήμασιν) complemented (ἀνταναπληρῶ) the afflictions of Christ (τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ), and this advanced the cause of the Gospel.

Paul's servant ministry to the church (ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος) had a specific objective: "I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known" (κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ). By God's assignment Paul became God's slave serving the spiritual nourishment of the Word of God. Note that his sufferings completed (ἀνταναπληρῶ) the afflictions of Christ, and this is defined largely in terms of his ministry as 'making full' (πληρῶσαι) the Word of God. Ministry in the midst of suffering made the gospel 'full,' in the sense of 'concretizing it' experientially. As believers observed Paul enduring suffering the truth of the apostolic gospel, it was embedded into their understanding far deeper.

Here is a real challenge to us living in a pleasure oriented society. Contrary to the heresy of a 'health and wealth' gospel preached often in our day, suffering in ministry is the much to be preferred option, because it enters us mysteriously into spiritual union with the suffering Christ who feels the pain of His people's sufferings. By enduring sufferings, our bond with the risen but suffering Christ is deepened and strengthened far more than in times without suffering. To walk away from this in refusal to endure sufferings is to walk away from the greatest possible opportunity to deepen our relationship with Christ.

The gospel as mystery: "26 the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27 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." (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, 26 τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν,— νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, 27 οἷς Thess 3:10). The presence of the definite article τὰ suggests the phrase "what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" refers to something well-known (so Lohse, 71; Zeilinger, *Der Erstgeborene*, 89) and agrees with the apocalyptic notion of a definite measure of affliction to be endured in the last days. As God had set a definite measure in time (cf 4 Ezra 4:36, 37; Gal 4:4) and the limit of the tribulations at the end (cf Mark 13:5–27) so there is a definite measure of suffering that is to be filled up. That limit of the messianic woes has not yet been reached. There are still deficiencies (τὰ ὑστερήματα) which Paul through his sufferings is in the process of completing.

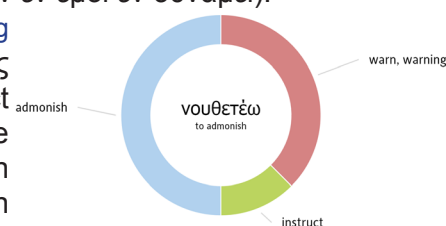
Though the precise significance of ἀντί in the verb ἀνταναπληρῶ ("complete") is not certain (it has been taken to mean "in quick succession," or "instead," "for someone else" [cf BAG, 72]; Lightfoot, 162, 163, after a comparison of classical and Hellenistic Greek occurrences rendered the verb "I fill up on my part," "I supplement," arguing that the preposition "signifies that the supply comes from an *opposite quarter* to the deficiency"; while Schweizer, 84, and Moule, *Idiom Book*, 71, suggest it may anticipate the force of the ὑπέρ which follows), the simplest interpretation is to regard the prefix as suggesting correspondence, i.e. the supply corresponds to the deficiency so that the filling up *replaces* the lack (cf Bruce, 215).

The apostle, through the sufferings which he endures in his own flesh (ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου refers to his bodily sufferings, or as Schweizer, *TDNT* 7, 136, puts it: "the reference is to the physical existence of the apostle as this is exposed to affliction"; cf Gal 6:17: ἐν τῷ σώματί μου; 2 Cor 4:10 and 12:7), contributes to the sum total of these eschatological afflictions. By helping to fill up this predetermined measure Paul brings the end, the dawning of the future glory, so much closer (Lohse, 71).

ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης). To the generations of people before Christ, the message of God was hidden, especially in a most important aspect: its inclusiveness of all peoples. But with the coming of Christ and the raising up of people dedicated to God, ‘the saints’ (τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ), to them was given understanding of this mystery that salvation was extended to the Gentiles as well as to Jews. The glory (δόξης) here is the divine Presence of God in the midst of His people. The Jews of Jesus’ day were convinced this was the exclusive possession of Covenant Israel with all other nations excluded. But, in the new revelation, the message came that no, God’s Presence belonged to all people who would come to Him through His Son, Jesus Christ. Thus in Christ, and in Christ alone, is there the expectation of the divine Presence of Almighty God. This formerly hidden message now is being proclaimed by the new people of God, and Paul is one of them fervently seeking to get the word out to the entire world.

Paul as a herald of this hope in Christ: “28 It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.” (28 ὃν ἡμεῖς καταγγέλλομεν νοουθετοῦντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον καὶ διδάσκοντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ, ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ· 29 εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει).

The manner of this preaching is by “warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom” (νοουθετοῦντες¹⁴ πάντα ἄνθρωπον καὶ διδάσκοντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ). Warnings, admonitions to correct behavior etc. were given by Paul as a part of his preaching of Christ as the message of God’s hope. Also Paul’s preaching was teaching every person the message of God’s Word with spiritual wisdom and understanding. In order to fully understand how Paul did this, one should read the content of his letters. They are the prime example of what he is describing here to the Colossians. This can be supplemented by reading Luke’s version of his preaching found in several texts in Acts chapters twelve through twenty-eight.



The objective of this preaching is to “present everyone mature in Christ” (ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ). Paul had no interest in developing spiritual elitists who felt themselves superior to other believers because of some emotionally charged experience. Instead, his objective through his ministry was to grow spiritual adults who moved from spiritual infancy at conversion to spiritual adulthood. This would only be achieved over time, and with much teaching and warning. Coming to Christ in conversion is a religious experience; Christian growth to maturity is a process.

The eschatological goal is in view here. Paul sees himself charged by God to function as a temple priest in bringing the offering before God. His commission is to bring Christians grown up as spiritual adults to present to God in final judgment.

The intensity of this preaching is “For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.” (εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει). Toward this objective (εἰς ὃ) Paul worked hard (κοπιῶ) as he agonized (ἀγωνιζόμενος) over the churches seeking to help them move toward spiritual maturity.¹⁵ Disciplining believers is not easy and poses real burdens on

^{14c} νοουθετέω fut. νοουθετήσω; 1 aor ἐνουθέτησα. Pass.: aor ptc νοουθετηθέντες Wsd 12:26; pf 2 sg νενουθέτησαι Job 38:18 (s. prec. entry; Trag. et al.; PGrenf II 93, 3; LXX; pseudepigr; Philo; Jos., Ant. 4, 260; 20, 162; Did.) **to counsel about avoidance or cessation of an improper course of conduct, admonish, warn, instruct** w. acc. of pers (Dio Chrys. 56 [73], 10; Sb 6263, 26) **Ac 20:31; 1 Cor 4:14** (Wsd 11:10 τούτους ὡς πατήρ νοουθετῶν; PsSol 13:9; Jos., Bell. 1, 481, Ant. 3, 311); **Col 1:28; 3:16** (in the last two pass. w. διδάσκειν, as Pla., Leg. 8, 84b; Philo, Decal.); **1 Th 5:12; 2 Th 3:15; Tit 1:11** v.l.; 1 Cl 7:1; 2 Cl 19:2. ἀλλήλους **Ro 15:14; 2 Cl 17:2**. τοὺς ἀτάκτους **warn the idle 1 Th 5:14** (punish, as Plut., Sertor. 578 [19, 11] πηληγαῖς v., probably overstates). τὸν οἶκον Hv 1, 3, 1; also τὰ τέκνα 1, 3, 2. τὰς χήρας καὶ τοὺς ὀρφανούς 2, 4, 3. ἀμαρτάνοντας^m 8:10. Pass. νοουθετεῖσθαι ὑπό τινας (Philo, Deus Imm. 134; Jos., Ant. 20, 162a) 2 Cl 17:3; Hv 3, 5, 4.—DELS s.v νόος. M-M. TW. Spicq.” [William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 679.]

^{15c} With vivid metaphors Paul indicates how he exerts himself on behalf of the Colossians and other Gentiles like them (the singular is used again in v 29 to describe his own labors, but this implies no adverse comment on the ministry of others for he was aware of their faithful labor on behalf of the various communities: 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Cor 16:16; Rom 16:6). κόπος, a word used in secular Greek of ‘a beating,’ ‘weariness’ (as though one had been beaten) and ‘exertion,’ was the proper word for physical tiredness induced by work, exertion or heat (see A. von Harnack, “Κόπος (Κοπιᾶν) Οἱ Κοπιῶντες) im frühchristlichen Sprachgebrauch,”

pastors. Paul details some of this in 2 Cor. 1:3-7 (NRSV):

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, 4 who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. 5 For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ. 6 If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation; if we are being consoled, it is for your consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we are also suffering. 7 Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our consolation.

3 Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ πατὴρ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν καὶ θεὸς πάσης παρακλήσεως, 4 ὁ παρακαλῶν ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ θλίψει ἡμῶν, εἰς τὸ δύνασθαι ἡμᾶς παρακαλεῖν τοὺς ἐν πάσῃ θλίψει διὰ τῆς παρακλήσεως ἧς παρακαλούμεθα αὐτοὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ. 5 ὅτι καθὼς περισσεύει τὰ παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς ἡμᾶς, οὕτως διὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ περισσεύει καὶ ἡ παράκλησις ἡμῶν. 6 εἴτε δὲ θλιβόμεθα, ὑπὲρ τῆς ὑμῶν παρακλήσεως καὶ σωτηρίας· εἴτε παρακαλούμεθα, ὑπὲρ τῆς ὑμῶν παρακλήσεως τῆς ἐνεργουμένης ἐν ὑπομονῇ τῶν αὐτῶν παθημάτων ὧν καὶ ἡμεῖς πάσχομεν, 7 καὶ ἡ ἐλπίς ἡμῶν βεβαία ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· εἰδότες ὅτι ὡς κοινωνοὶ ἐστε τῶν παθημάτων, οὕτως καὶ τῆς παρακλήσεως.

Paul managed this heavy load, not in his own strength, but as he says, through “the energy given to him in the power of God” (κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει). Through the enabling of God alone could the apostle carry such a heavy burden in ministry. By himself he would have failed in ministry and compromised the gospel by watering down its message and avoiding suffering at every corner. But with this divine power present in his ministry he was able to endure the horrible sufferings that came to him over the length of his Christian ministry.

What a challenge the apostle presents to us today! Is our relationship with Christ deep enough to experience pain and suffering in service through which we recognize the presence of the risen Christ in our life? For Paul this was the only -- absolutely the only -- way by which he could preach Jesus to a pagan world. To be a διάκονος of Christ means being responsible to faithfully disclose the most powerful mystery of all time: God loves all humanity and desires to make it possible for every person to enter into His holy presence. We as God’s ἅγιοι are charged with the responsibility to get this message out to this lost world. Easy to do? Absolutely not! Like Paul says in v. 29, we will have to ‘take a beating in agonizing struggle’ (κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος) to achieve such an objective. But, -- thanks be to God -- we are not to do this in our own strength, but rather in His energizing from His power that takes place deep down inside us (κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει). Now this is real ministry, Christian ministry in its pure expression!

2. What does the text mean to us today?

From Paul’s depiction of his ministry up to this point in his life, we can learn much. The areas of application of this passage fall, first, into understanding the true nature of Christian ministry and service, in rejection of so many phoney models and false teaching floating around in church circles today. We must overcome our cultural distaste for pain and suffering and realize the enormous spiritual benefits from the linkage of ministry and suffering. Paul opens a door here for profound understanding of deep spiritual dynamics intended by God to take place in ministry actions. Most of us, I suspect, know very little about what Paul is describing.

ZNW 27 [1928] 1–10, and Hauck, TDNT 3, 827–30). It denoted severe labor and, together with its cognate κοπιᾶω was used in the New Testament of: (1) work in general, such as manual labor (2 Cor 6:5; 11:27; Eph 4:28); and (2) Christian work in and for the community. Under the latter heading κοπιᾶω could describe Paul’s apostolic ministry (1 Cor 4:12; 15:10; Gal 4:11; Phil 2:16; Col 1:29; cf. κόπιος 1 Thess 2:9; 3:5; 2 Thess 3:8; 2 Cor 11:23), as well as the toil of other Christians (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Cor 16:16; Rom 16:6, 12; cf. κόπιος 1 Cor 3:8; 15:58; 2 Cor 10:15). These cognate words were key terms used of Paul’s pastoral efforts in some of his earliest correspondence (note the references in 1 and 2 Thessalonians), and in Colossians 1:29 the emphasis is on the great effort expended by one who labors unceasingly for the congregation’s welfare.

“ἀγωνίζομαι (‘fight,’ ‘struggle,’ ‘engage in a contest,’ BAG, 15), perhaps even a stronger term than the preceding, could denote a physical conflict in which weapons were used (John 18:36; cf. 2 Macc 8:16) and an athletic contest (1 Cor 9:25). Pfitzner, Paul, 109, 110, claims that at verse 29 this verb (a participle ἀγωνιζόμενος) is qualified by κοπιῶ (the finite verb), and not vice versa, so that both words designate the intense labor and effort of Paul toward the one goal of presenting every man perfect in Christ. So the translation ‘striving’ (denoting a metaphorical usage) is to be preferred to any reference to struggle or conflict (cf. 1 Tim 4:10 where a similar expression is found: εἰς τοῦτο ... κοπιῶμεν καὶ ἀγωνιζόμεθα, ‘to this end we toil and strive’). Pfitzner concludes that, although a conscious reference to the athletic contest is hardly present, the verb ἀγωνίζομαι still carries with it the original coloring of striving after a specific aim or goal (see further on ἀγών, 2:1).” [Peter T. O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary : Colossians-Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 44:90.]

