

Colossians 1 pt. 6 v24-29

Following Paul's exalted presentation of Christ in the previous verses he now relates his own personal experiences and ministry; all of which are firmly anchored in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

It was especially important for Paul to bring his personal experience and personal focus to bear in this letter since the Colossian church appears to have been dealing with competing ideas of what the central focus of their church should be. (Col 2:8, 11, 16-23)

Paul's message for the Colossians is as timely as ever and his communication to them regarding his own singular focus on Jesus is a great reminder to the church of our age. We must keep Jesus at the center of our focus.

Our efforts should always remain focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than chasing after the fringy, peripheral, debatable -- doctrinal paradoxes, word games, or eschatological bingo cards. Our endeavors in ministry would do well to reflect the ministry of

the Apostle Paul and his heart to keep Christ at the front and center of his efforts. (1 Cor 2:2)

So now, examining Paul's own ministry, we see that he turns again to a common theme throughout his writings to the churches -- ***rejoicing in suffering.***

V.24 - During this time Paul was a very real prisoner. His account of suffering, enumerated for us in his writings to the Corinthians, is far more than figurative language meant to convey internal turmoil, as we modern Christians sometimes portray it.

Here's a sample of Paul's suffering:

[2Co 11:24-28 NLT] "Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. 26 I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. 27 I have worked hard and long,

enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. 28 Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.”

What we know from the corpus of Paul’s writings is that his ministry was marked by an abundance of physical, mental, and emotional suffering.

And yet, for all of that, he did not complain, nor consider his suffering to be a closed door or divine retribution for some hidden sin but rather he viewed his suffering as participating fully in the work of Jesus Christ who suffered for our sakes and gave an example of fidelity in the midst of suffering and abuse.

Paul was moved to rejoice that he participated in Christ’s suffering in his own body. In Romans Paul writes: [Rom 5:3 NKJV] 3 And not only [that], but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;

When a Christian suffers for the cause of Christ, in unity with the sufferings of Christ, who suffered first for our sakes, we can rejoice with the ancient Apostles and the first saints who, when

they suffered, viewed their suffering as confirmation that they were living out the gospel faithfully. They saw their suffering as an indication that Christ “counted them worthy to suffer shame for His name.” (Acts 5:41)

Paul likewise rejoiced in his suffering. And, he viewed his suffering, as a shared fellowship with Christ, FOR THE CHURCH.

Paul embraced whatever suffering came his way by the will of God as an act of service to the body of Christ - the church. One of the ways that Paul invested in the church, universally and locally, was by demonstrating tenacious faithfulness and joy in the midst of extreme suffering.

Paul’s example of suffering was passed on to the churches, internalized, and embraced by early Christians for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Eusebius relays a second century example of Christians enduring suffering and persecution in Gaul:

“...while we all trembled, [and] ... feared that on account of the weakness of her body, she would be unable to make bold

confession, Blandina was filled with such power as to be delivered and raised above those who were torturing her by turns from morning till evening in every manner, so that they acknowledged that they were conquered, and could do nothing more to her. And they were astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken; and they testified that one of these forms of torture was sufficient to destroy life, not to speak of so many and so great sufferings. But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, renewed her strength in her confession; and her comfort and ... relief from the pain of her sufferings was in exclaiming, 'I am a Christian, and there is nothing vile done by us.'

But Sanctus also endured marvelously and superhumanly all the outrages which he suffered. While the wicked men hoped, by the continuance and severity of his tortures to wring something from him which he ought not to say, he girded himself against them with such firmness that he would not even tell his name, or the nation or city to which he belonged, or whether he was bond or free, but answered in the Roman tongue to all their questions, 'I am a Christian.' ... And his body was a witness of his sufferings, being one complete wound and bruise, drawn out of shape, and altogether unlike a human form. Christ, suffering in him, manifested his glory, delivering him from his adversary, and making him an ensample [sic] for the others, showing that nothing

is fearful where the love of the Father is, and nothing painful where there is the glory of Christ.”¹

This is our heritage. Our spiritual parentage. Suffering for Jesus' sake no matter what the cost.

Not until recently has the idea that “suffering is a bad thing” become normal thought among Christians. Sometimes when we encounter the least bit of resistance we start to wonder if we have run into a closed door, or perhaps God is punishing us for some accidental sin, or that we aren’t worthy to participate in ministry. All of that is false!

Suffering is not only a normal part of the Christian experience (when lived in accordance with the gospel) but it is healthy for us. As we maintain joy, as we actively REJOICE, in our sufferings then we see that our lives become the gospel message.

V.25 - Paul affirms his service to the church, understanding that he has been given a stewardship from God, and one that he takes seriously no matter the cost to his own self.

¹ Eusebius, *The History of the Church (electronic edition)*. Trans. A.C. McGiffert (Pantianos Classics: 1890), np.

Paul's use of the word 'stewardship' (οἰκονομία, oikonomia) communicates the sense of a "responsibility to administer, or manage the household of another."² Bratcher and Nida suggest that, "The Greek *oikonomia* [stewardship] means a position of responsibility, an office, a task to perform."³ We see here that Paul understood his responsibility to God's household as originating directly from God and demanding his best efforts and attention as he sought to fulfill his God-given role, even in the face of suffering.

We gain further insight into Paul's understanding of his Apostolic office from Acts 9:

[Act 9:10-16 NKJV] 10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord [said] to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for [one] called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 "And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting [his] hand on him, so that he might receive his sight." 13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints

² William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 697.

³ Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 38.

in Jerusalem. 14 "And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 "For I will show him ***how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.***"
(emphasis mine)

Paul knew from the beginning of his ministry, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that God had placed him into a ministry marked by suffering, but one that he dared not turn away from.

This was a big deal! Paul was far more than a professional listener! He understood that the work God had set him apart for was not about himself! He writes here in our text that this stewardship from God was given to him ***for others.***

And that God had a specific purpose in setting Paul apart...to reveal a timeless mystery -- a mystery that would undoubtedly ruffle some feathers among the "religious" people of his day.

Let's not forget too Paul describes himself as a minister (διάκονος, diakonos). That term means *servant*. A servant is somebody uniquely focused on the benefit of somebody else.

What we gather about Paul is that he wasn't overly concerned with his own personal circumstances - even when his own rights, and human dignity were assaulted. He wilfully placed his own personhood, dignity, and resources at the disposal of Jesus Christ for the sake of others -- that is exactly the heart of Jesus!

This is a big reminder and a constant reminder that throughout the New Testament God's people are called to be servants to others even when that involves suffering and forgoing some of our dearly beloved rights and dignity.

And how did Paul best serve the church? By fulfilling the word of God or, as other translations and commentators suggest, "*to present to you the word of God in its fullness.*"^[4] ^[5] That lines up nicely with Paul's heartfelt address to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27, "[Act 20:27 NKJV] 27 "For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God."

⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 154.

⁵ NLT: "God has given me the responsibility of serving his church by proclaiming his entire message to you." NIV: "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—"

ESV: "of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,"

It must be understood that Paul **IS** fulfilling God's word by fully presenting God's word to the Colossians, a mainly gentile congregation.

Paul understood that his ministry was a fulfilment of God's promise to the gentiles as he declared in Antioch: [Act 13:47 NKJV] 47 "For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.' " (quoting Isa 49:6)

V.26 In our text, Paul describes his enduring effort to present the gospel to the gentiles as, "revealing to God's saints the mystery which had been hidden from ages and generations."

That's quite cryptic! But the point of Paul's language is that through the fullness of God's word, God has chosen to reveal to the saints a bigger message that is carried throughout the fullness of the Scriptures.

God did not plainly reveal this mystery in times past but he did reveal it plainly in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul writes about this exact thing in Ephesians:

[Eph 3:3-6 NKJV] “...by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel,”

We also find a similar thought in Paul’s letter to the Romans:

[Rom 16:25-26 NKJV] 25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began 26 but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith--”

It is somewhat difficult for Christians to understand the gravity of what Paul is declaring here in regards to this revealed mystery because we live in the age of the closed canon of Scripture. To

some degree the mystery that God has grafted Gentiles into His holy family has become 'old hat' to us.

If we try to empathize with the ancient saints we may come close to understanding.

Remember, the Scriptures in Jesus' day were what we call the Old Testament. Of course, Jesus didn't call them the Old Testament, nor did Paul and the Apostles. Those writings that we have preserved in the Old Testament were often called: the law, the prophets, and the writings.

Now, just imagine, based on what you know of the Old Testament, restricted solely to the Old Testament -- how much do you know of Christ through that?

Certainly many Bible students, having worked up the courage to study through the Old Testament, have found themselves scratching their heads more than a few times. Wondering - "what's the point of all of these laws?" "why does Israel seem to blow it all the time?" "what's up with all of these genealogies and names?" "what is this common thread of reconciliation with God, atonement, judgment, justice, sacrifice, offering, covenants, etc."

“What’s going on with King David and his children?” “what’s up with this ‘suffering servant’ that Isaiah writes about?” And then there’s all of the figurative language to think about -- the scepter of Judah, somebody referred to as Shiloh (Gen 49:10), the root of Jesse (Isa 11:10), etc.

So, in the first century all of those threads are moving through the collective consciousness of a peculiar religious sect in Roman Palestine. AND THEN! A man comes on the scene and says: “[Jhn 5:39 NKJV] 39 "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.”

So all of that mystery, and head scratching finally culminates and finds resolution in the body of a man from Nazareth - Jesus, the Christ.

How special that generation is - to have seen and handled and heard the living word of God! (1 Jhn 1:1-3) And yet, Jesus says, [Jhn 20:29 NKJV] ...Blessed [are] those who have not seen and [yet] have believed."

So that is part of Paul's mission - to declare this timeless cosmic mystery - the gospel - to a people who had not seen Christ and yet were invited to believe.

v.27 Paul defines the mystery in very plain terms.

In case you were getting nervous about that term, mystery, here it is distilled into a concentrated form: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

That, in its distilled form, is a rich message, willed by God to be revealed to the saints through the fulness of and fulfillment of His word.

If we are Christ's, then Christ dwells in us. We have become one with Him and He with us, and we shall share in His glory. (Jhn 17:22-26)

THAT is what Paul labored for. THAT is what Paul suffered for -- to bring this message, an eternal hope of life with Christ, to see His glory and to participate in His glory by all means (including suffering) forevermore.

V.28-29 It is CHRIST we preach AND CHRIST WHO LABORS.

Paul drives the central gospel message home. HIM WE PREACH, WARNING, AND TEACHING! No side issues, no peripherals, no pet doctrines - the doctrine that Paul was laser focused on was the doctrine of Jesus Christ!

That is a great encouragement to us to remain steadfast in what it is that we are teaching. Preach no other gospel! Make no other doctrine the focal point of your evangelism or your discipleship! (and there are many to choose from, and many have gone astray chasing after them) Keep Christ at the center!

As Paul notes - it is the gospel of Jesus that is both proclaimed by preaching and taught by instruction that has the power to present people as perfect in Christ and to Christ!

That is what Paul worked hard for, even striving, the Greek gives the sense of “to fight, struggle” and “to engage in intense struggle, ... against strong opposition”^[6] ^[7]

⁶ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 17.

⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 495.

Notice that Paul isn't striving for the gospel in his own strength. Christ is working in him and through Him. When we allow Christ to work in us we are nearly assured that the gospel will remain at the center of our efforts.

So many Christians lose focus and strive about things other than Jesus and this is a call to return to the main thing, the only thing that can save souls - the gospel; and the only name by which men must be saved - Jesus Christ. (Acts 4:12)

Christ is the overwhelming theme of Paul's message to the Colossians and I pray that we who are called by His name may keep Christ the center of our message as well.