

Called to Suffer and Rejoice

Part 3- That We Might Fill the Afflictions of Christ

January 27, 2013

Colossians 1:24-29

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

25 Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God*,

26 *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,

27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

To the Glory of God

Now our Lord Jesus made it clear in **Mark 8:34** that all His followers must take up their crosses and follow Him. He made it plain in **Matthew 10:25** that if people called Jesus "Beelzebul" how much more will they malign those of His household? In **John 15:20** Jesus said,

If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you

For those who devote their lives to spreading the Gospel- the Bible promises even more suffering. For example, in **The Acts 9:16**- Jesus told Ananias to tell the newly converted Paul,

I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name

And even though this is probably one of the single most neglected issues in the modern Church- suffering is as common in the Bible as singing; it is as relative to believers as prayer; and it is as much a part of Christian life as Bible Study. So that is why I am bringing you this series of messages on suffering- for two reasons:

1. I believe we should prepare to suffer for Christ because the Bible says that we should
2. I believe that our modern situation says we should.

I honestly do not believe that our situation here in this country can continue on its present course without huge implications concerning how the Church is viewed by the majority of Americans- which will bring about great persecution and hardship on the average American Christian who in any way seeks to maintain Biblical purity.

But I am not bringing these messages at this time simply because it is my belief that the days we are in are very evil and the path of Righteousness God has called us to is very costly- but also because the Promise of the Bible is that God's people will suffer.

If the main objective of God was to provide His children with safety and happiness and prosperity and healthy and strong bodies in this life- if that were God's main Objective- to make *this* life better and easier for us- then it would be true that suffering would not only be a huge inconvenience but also a colossal waste of God's time. And if that were true- then Joyce Meyer would be right when she told the editors of *Time Magazine* a few years ago-

“Why would anyone ever want to be a Christian if they thought they would have to suffer as a result?”

If the main objective of Salvation was to allow His children to *escape* and *avoid* punishment and discipline and chastisement and correction- then the famous television preachers on the Hay, Wood, and Stubble Television Network would all be right and we should spend our time in “binding the devil” and in “casting out” the trials and in “rising up in faith” and in “speaking creatively” against the pain and misery of this life so that we may avoid all suffering and so that we may be

delivered from it and so that we may escape it on this earth and go about to live that good and happy and secure life.

If it were true that the only reason why God's people suffer is because they lack the faith that it takes to overcome it or because they fail to cast it aside or to be free from it- then those teachers would be telling the Truth. If only that were true...

But if it is true that God's main Objective in saving His children is to mold them and shape them and change them into the Image and Likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ and *not* to give them a better life down here; if it is God's main Objective and Purpose that through strong and powerful and mountain moving faith that we *endure* suffering to the Glory of God rather than avoid it; that we are *changed* by our suffering rather than escape it; and that we are *exercised* by going through our suffering rather than by casting it out- if it God's main Objective and Purpose to makes us holy rather than happy; to make us faithful rather than financially secure and if it is God's Will that we are humble rather than healthy- if *those* things were true- then I suggest to you that suffering is *not* some annoyance that we should strive to be free from; that it is not some out of control evil for which we should employ our great faith to "bind"; and it is not an equal power in some titanic struggle against God for which God is waiting patiently for us to rise up and stop- but that suffering is actually one of our best friends that God is Sovereign over and that suffering is an instrument in God's Hands- that by His Spirit He affects to His Own Glory and our ultimate Good and that suffering- even horrific suffering- is a tool in the hand of a Good and Merciful God that God uses to bring about His Plan and His Purposes and His Will in the earth.

I would suggest to you that there are many other things that are far worse than suffering and things for which we should fear far more than any persecution of affliction that might come our way. For example- we should fear that we as God's people have a testimony that we have stopped loving the world that is passing away and that our Treasure really and truly is not on this earth but is in Heaven far more than we should dread any suffering or any trial. Husbands should fear that they are not loving their wives like Christ loved the church and they should fear that they are not leading their families and that they are not assuming the role of prophet and priest in their homes and they should fear that sin and worldliness might be rampant in the lives of

those living under their roof far more than they should fear any suffering.

Wives should fear that they are disrespecting their husbands and are living lives in complete isolation to the authority of their husbands and that they are not training the younger women to be godly and chaste and virtuous far more than they would fear any suffering that may be coming their way.

Children should fear that they are disrespecting their parents and are rebelling against their parents and are consumed by the desire to be popular far more than they would fear any suffering that may be coming their way.

We should fear that our lives are not lived in sacrifice to the risen Savior and that the sin of our hearts is dominating our lives and that we are deceived about our own spirituality and that our hearts are idol factories that turn out new and innovative idols and idolatries every moment. We should all fear Him Who has the Power to cast both body and soul in to hellfire infinitely more than we should ever fear that we might suffer.

It is a testimony to the effect that man-made and false teaching has had on us and a testimony to our own willingness to be deceived that after 2,000 years of Christianity being on the earth that any genuine believer who spends any time at all reading the Bible and who lives in a world that is so filled with pain and misery would actually think that they will escape suffering.

The Holy and Inerrant Word of the living God is filled with passages breathed out by God the Holy Spirit that *promise* that those who follow Jesus will indeed suffer and yet the issue of Suffering is looked at by an ever growing number of people within the modern Church as a “curse” rather than a “blessing”; as something that should be “overcome” rather than something to “endure”; and as something that can and should be “avoided” rather than welcomed as a tool in God’s Hands to mold and shape us into the Image and Likeness of Jesus; as something that is purely the result of Man’s bad choices and a fallen angel running amuck in the earth rather than the Will of a an absolutely Sovereign God- and while literally millions of Blood bought and Spirit filled souls are suffering unspeakable pain and agony right at this moment- many prima donna charlatans in the modern Church arrogantly teach today from the safety and security of the most secure

and the most prosperous nation in the history of the world that if only those precious souls were spiritual enough- they could avoid suffering altogether.

It is simply not possible in the minds of many in the modern Church that a Good and Sovereign God would not only *allow* but actually *desire* the Persecution of His Own Children and yet I will try by God's help to show you that that is exactly what the Bible teaches and that is exactly what the majority of the leaders of the Christian Church have taught for the first 1850 years until the last 150 years or so.

Over the last several weeks- we have been exploring four Biblical purposes for suffering:

1. **The Moral (Spiritual) Purpose-** because suffering refines our holiness and hope (**Romans 5:1–8**),
2. **The Intimacy Purpose-** because in suffering our relationship with Christ becomes deeper and sweeter (**Philippians 3:7–14**)
3. **The Missions Purpose-** because God calls us to complete Christ's Afflictions as we extend the Worth of His Suffering through the reality of our own (**Colossians 1:24**)
4. **The Glory Purpose-** because this slight, momentary affliction is working for us an eternal weight of glory (**2Corinthians 4:16–18**).

And today I want to look at the third one:

3. **The Missions Purpose-** because God calls us to complete Christ's Afflictions as we extend the Worth of His Suffering through the reality of our own (**Colossians 1:24**)

So from what the Apostle Paul writes here to the Church at Colosse- we can see that suffering for God's children is not accidental; it isn't uncommon; it isn't something that only comes to people of weak or no faith; and it isn't something for which strong and vibrant faith will deliver you out of. The suffering that the Holy Bible spends a great deal of time discussing and which the modern Church spends a great deal of time ignoring is *strategic*- it has both a *gracious* and a *purposeful* design. Suffering is meant to reveal the Love of Christ to the world.

Paul explains that gracious and purposeful design like this in verse 24 of the Passage that Brother Andy just read to you:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Now there is a concept that the Bible teaches over in **1Corinthians 2:12& 13** that says:

12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,

13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*.

And what that means is that since the Holy Scriptures are the most unique Book in all the world and came to us by way of inspiration- the Bible must be interpreted in a very different way than you would interpret any other book. So if you want to understand the Bible correctly- you must use the Bible itself to make clear what the Bible is actually saying. So you do *not* compare what the Bible teaches with human examples or human logic and reasoning- but you let Scripture interpret Scripture.

So if we are to understand what the Apostle Paul meant here in **Colossians 1:24**- I suggest that we need to go to **Philippians 2:30** and read that verse that says:

Philippians 2:30

because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

So the “**filling up what is lacking**” in **Colossians 1:24** does *not* mean: *to “add to what is already there”*- but rather it means *“to carry what is there to those for whom it is meant.”*

So for the Philippians- that meant that Epaphroditus would carry the Philippian’s love to Paul in the form of gifts. And here in **Colossians 1:24**, it means that Paul will carry “**Christ’s Afflictions**” to the outlying world by and through and in his own “sufferings.” So then what this is

teaching us is that the Divine *design* of Paul's suffering was to embody and display Christ's Own Suffering to the world.

You see, when the lost pagan world sees a missionary suffer in the act of bringing them Christ- they are seeing the Love that Christ had for them on the cross displayed before their eyes. Now the lost world does not *deserve* the gift of Christian suffering. But the Bible teaches that God gives it anyway. Please turn quickly to **Hebrews 11** and let's read a very familiar Passage together. **Hebrews 11:27-38**:

27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.

28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn would not touch them.

29 By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though *they were passing* through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

31 By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

32 And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets,

33 who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed *acts of righteousness*, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

34 quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

35 Women received *back* their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection;

36 and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment.

37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated

38 (*men* of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

Now the writer of **Hebrews** describes two very different groups of people here. One group was supernaturally and miraculously delivered out of their troubles and out of their sufferings and out of their afflictions. The people described in verses 27- 35a were rescued and healed and delivered and brought out by God's Strong and Mighty Hand while the people of verses 35b- 38 were delivered by this very same God into great sufferings and great turmoil and great pain and agony and were *not* rescued and were *not* healed and were *not* set free.

And what unites both groups is what the writer says in verse 39 when he wrote:

Hebrews 11:39a

And all these, having gained approval through their faith...

So we see that both groups had gained approval by God through their great and strong and powerful faith and yet they had very different results. The faith of one group empowered them to give God Glory as they were healed and set free and delivered while the faith of the second group empowered them to give God Glory as they suffered and died.

So from that we can rightly conclude that- for the most part- what the modern Church teaches about the subject of suffering is just flat out wrong and that being delivered from sickness and trials and persecution and affliction is *not* simply a matter of our faith or the words we speak or the prayers we pray- but suffering or not suffering has much more to do with God's Will than how much or how little faith we have.

We see from these inspired and inerrant Scriptures that while it is sometimes God's Will to heal His children and to set them free from suffering and to deliver them from afflictions- it is not always God's Will to do that. Sometimes it is God's Will that His Own children suffer and *not* be delivered.

And as we praise God for the healings and the deliverances- we need to also praise God for the sufferings as well- because the Word of the living God says that both of them were "Good". So while the setting free and the rescuing is a demonstration of God's Goodness and Mercy- I say to you that the Bible teaches that God leaving His children in terrible sufferings and not delivering them is also a demonstration of

God's Goodness and Mercy as well. And that is what this Sermon Series on Suffering is all about.

Hebrews 11:27-38 describes some of this Christian suffering and how the world does not deserve it. Look at verses 37&38 again:

37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated

38 (*men* of whom the world was not worthy...

Those last words mean that the lost pagan world does not deserve the gift of these suffering Christians. Yet God continues to give them. So just how are these suffering saints a "gift to the world"? The answer lies in their faith. Verse 39 says:

And all these, having gained approval through their faith...

In other words- all of these people were approved by God because of their faith- even the ones who suffered and were *not* delivered. So their suffering and their lack of being healed or delivered was *not* the result of a *lack* of faith. Rather, the worth or the value of their suffering lay precisely *in* their faith. But how could this be true?

Notice in **Hebrews 11:27-35a** that sometimes through faith God works miracles of healing and rescue. But then notice in **Hebrews 11:25b-38** that sometimes God gives people the faith to faithfully endure misery and even death. And the common denominator in the faith that *escapes* and the faith that *endures* is that in both- God is treasured above any liberty and above all life.

The one who escapes says, "*Jesus is better than what I gain by being healed or delivered.*" And the one who dies says, "*Jesus is better than what I lose by suffering and dying.*" And that is the essence of true Biblical faith-

Jesus is always trusted and valued above either life or death

... that Jesus is more valuable than living and He is more important than dying. And that is why these suffering Christians- especially suffering missionaries- are a marvelous gift to the world. Their Jesus-

sustained suffering embodies the Gospel-Truth that Jesus is more valuable than all that life can give and all that death can take away. What a vivid proclamation of the Cross! And I would suggest to you that this Truth is the most precious gift that a Christian can give to the world.

So even though the Bible says that the world does not deserve this gift of suffering saints- God gives it anyway. And I pray that every soul in this Church will develop an all-satisfying faith in Jesus Christ so that when the time comes for us to give this gift of suffering to the world- we will engage in it with joy. So I beg you to prepare for this suffering now by knowing Jesus deeply. Now turn back to **Colossians 1:24** and read that verse again with me:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Here Paul is saying that his own sufferings are two things:

1. **my sufferings... for your sake**
2. **filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.**

So from those two statements- I have two questions:

- ✓ In what way are Paul's sufferings for "the sake of" the Church?
- ✓ How does Paul's sufferings "fill up" what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?

How could anything be lacking in Christ's Afflictions? Was not His suffering and death for us utterly all-sufficient? Was Paul belittling the Sufferings of Jesus Christ in this Passage? What does Paul mean in verse 24? And just how does this apply to us?

In order to see verse 24 properly- we must look at it in connection with the rest of the Passage. So starting at verse 29- let's go *backward* and sum up what Paul is saying in this paragraph.

Colossians 1:29

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily

works within me.

Here the Apostle says that there is a “**purpose**” for which he labors. And the striving and the agonizing of this labor is not merely his own energy- it is the Power of Jesus Christ working mightily in him.

Colossians 1:28

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Here he describes the Purpose that he labors for- which is to

... present every man complete in Christ

So every single person that Paul reaches with the Gospel- he labors and strives to not simply inform them about some interesting information about God- but so that each one may stand before God- “complete” born again and forgiven and having the spotless Righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to them- and them loving and serving Christ faithfully. But look how Paul accomplishes this. He presents every man complete in Jesus Christ by:

... Proclaim[ing] Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom...

This is Paul's ceaseless labor- which Christ initiates first inside him and then energizes it to others through him.

Colossians 1:26&27

26 *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints,

27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Now these two verses defines in much greater detail just what it is that Paul proclaims and teaches and admonishes. He called it a “**mystery**” in verse 26- not because it can't be understood- but because it

has been hidden for ages and has now been revealed to the saints by the Life and Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Then verse 27 goes on to describe the riches of the Glory of this mystery. And that is:

Christ in you [Gentiles], the Hope of Glory

So what was *not* revealed fully in past ages was that the Jewish Messiah- the Christ- would actually reach out to *non*-Jewish nations and forgive and rescue and indwell *non*-Jewish people. And that He would actually live in them and give them the Promise of Abraham- which is:

The Hope of Glory in the Kingdom of God with all the saints

But now this mystery is being revealed and Paul is proclaiming Christ and teaching and admonishing everyone everywhere that the indwelling of the Messiah and the Hope of the Glory of God belong to everyone and anyone who trusts Christ and really hopes in the Glory of God.

Colossians 1:25

Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God*,

Verse 25 simply says that this proclamation of Jesus Christ is the fulfilling of a stewardship that God has given to Paul to spread God's Word. He is a servant of the Church and a steward of God. And his charge is to take the Word of God to the nations- offer them the Hope of Glory, and call them to repent and believe the Gospel.

And so he is a minister of the Church by gathering God's chosen ones from among the nations, and by teaching and admonishing them so that they can be presented fully complete in Christ.

Colossians 1:24

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's

afflictions.

And then finally- in Verse 24- Paul says that in God's Economy- this ministry of extending the mystery of Christ and the Hope of Glory to the nations, and then admonishing and teaching them- necessarily involves suffering.

But what does this mean that when Paul suffers for the church- extending the Hope of Glory to more and more people, and teaching them about the mystery of Christ, and suffering in doing this- what does he mean by saying that he is:

... filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions...

But how can any sinful human being "fill up" what is surely as full as any suffering could be- the Sufferings of Jesus Christ?

The context that we just looked at suggests that Paul's sufferings fill up Christ's Sufferings- not by *adding* anything to their worth- but by *extending* them to the people they were meant to bless. So what is "lacking" in the Afflictions of Jesus Christ is not that they are deficient in worth or merit- as though they could not sufficiently cover the sins of all who believe all by themselves. But what is "lacking" is that the infinite Value of Christ's Afflictions are not yet known and understood throughout the world.

You see- for the most part- after 2,000 years- the infinite Value and the infinite Worth and the infinite Merit of the Sufferings of Jesus Christ are still a "mystery"- they are still well hidden to most people. And God's intention is that this "mystery" be revealed and that it be extended to all of God's elect in every nation where God's chosen people may be- not just the Jews- but also the chosen Gentiles. That is what the Apostle Paul is teaching here.

So the Afflictions of Jesus Christ are "lacking"- only in the sense that they are not seen or known or appreciated among the nations of the world. So these Afflictions- in all their horror and brutality- must be carried to the world- along with the Gospel itself- by the ministers of the Word. And in doing that- by and through their *own* sometimes brutal and inhuman suffering- those ministers of the Word "fill up what is lacking" in the Afflictions of Christ by extending them to others.

So the *means* by which God has chosen to spread the Gospel to the

nations of the world and by that- the revealing or unveiling of the mystery of the Hope of the Glory of God- is by and through the preaching of the Gospel and the suffering of God's Ministers- and that through their own suffering- these messengers are extend the Value and the Worth of the Afflictions of Jesus Christ to the nations of the world.

Now as you struggle to grasp this concept- I want to return to the other sister verse that speaks of this same concept over in **Philippians 2:30** that says:

because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

Now from verse **Philippians 2:25**- we know that the "he" in this verse is a man named, "Epaphroditus". And this man was in the Church there at Philippi. And when the people of the Church gathered support for Paul- perhaps money or supplies or even books- they decided to send them to Paul- who was imprisoned in Rome by the hand of this man named, Epaphroditus.

Now during his journey to Paul's prison- this man almost lost his life. **Philippians 2:27** says he was sick to the point of death- but God saw fit to spare him.

Then in verse 29- Paul tells the Church in Philippi to honor Epaphroditus when he comes back, and he gives his reason in verse 30 which has words very similar to **Colossians 1:24**. **Philippians 2:27** says:

Because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete [i.e., fill up] what was deficient [i.e., lacking] in your service to me.

Now in the original Greek- the phrase

"... completing what was deficient..."

"... in your service to me" here in **Philippians 2:30** is almost word for word identical to:

"... filling up what is lacking... "

... in Christ's afflictions in Colossians 1:24.

So in what sense was the service of the Philippians to Paul "lacking" and in what sense did Epaphroditus "fill up" that which was lacking in their service?

Back in the 1800's- the Reformed Theologian, Marvin Vincent wrote this comment about this issue:

“The gift to Paul was a gift of the church as a body. It was a sacrificial offering of love. What was lacking, and what would have been grateful to Paul and to the church alike, was the church's presentation of this offering in person. This was impossible, and Paul represents Epaphroditus as supplying this lack by his affectionate and zealous ministry.” (*Epistle to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC, p. 78)

And that is exactly what the words mean in **Colossians 1:24** as well. Jesus Christ has prepared a Love Offering for the entire world by suffering and dying for sinners. This Offering is entirely full and it lacks nothing- except for one thing- a Personal Presentation to every single human being by Jesus Christ Himself- and in that sense- it *is* lacking.

And God's answer to this “lack” is to call different people to personally present the Value and the Worth of the Afflictions of Jesus Christ- which is what purchased Eternal Salvation- to the world. And in doing that- these people are:

"fill[ing] up what is lacking in the Afflictions of Christ."

We finish what the Afflictions of Jesus Christ were designed for- and that is- a Personal presentation of the Afflictions of Jesus Christ- to a world of people who do not know about their infinite Worth.

But notice how Paul says this personal presentation occurs in **Colossians 1:24**. He says that the infinite Worth and Value of the Afflictions of Jesus Christ are “fulfilled” or “filled” to the people of the world by and through:

... my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh...

In other words- here in **Colossians 1:24**- the Apostle Paul is teaching that his *own* sufferings are not simply something that he *personally* is going through to test and to try his own faith- but that by and through his sufferings- he is actually:

... filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

In other words- Paul is teaching here that he is giving every person that he comes in contact with in the pagan nations to which God has sent him to preach- a personal presentation of the Afflictions of the Lord Jesus Christ by and through the sufferings for which Paul himself is going through.

Another way of looking at this is to say that the infinite Value and the infinite Worth of the Sufferings of Jesus- which is what purchased our Salvation- is made known to the people of the world by and through the preaching of the Gospel *and* through the personal suffering of the minister by whom that Gospel is preached.

So Paul sees a very close connection between his own sufferings and Christ's Afflictions. And what this means to us is that God intends for the Afflictions of Jesus Christ to be presented to the world in their Glory through the afflictions of God's people.

So God really intends for the Body of Jesus Christ- which is the Church- to experience some of the suffering He experienced so that when we offer the Christ of the Cross to people- they see the Christ of the Cross in us.

So God has chosen us to make the Afflictions of Jesus Christ real and valuable and worthwhile for people by and through the afflictions that *we* experience as we preach Jesus to them and by living the life of love that Jesus lived.

I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake . . . filling up that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.

It is God's Will to have a personal presentation of the Sufferings of Jesus Christ to the world. And the way Christ intends to offer Himself as a Sufferer for the world to the world is through His Own people- who, like Him- are willing and able to suffer for the world.

So the *means* by which God has chosen to demonstrate the infinite Value and Worth of the Afflictions of Jesus Christ to the nations of the world is through the suffering of the servants of God who minister to the Gospel to them. The suffering Love of Jesus Christ for sinners is seen and understood by the lost world through the suffering love of God's people for sinners.

And what we see here in **Colossians 1:24** is really nothing more nor less than the "living out" or the application of Jesus' Words in **Mark 8:35** when He said:

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it.

The straight and narrow pathway of Salvation is the pathway of "losing one's life for the sake of the Gospel."

The point is that taking the Gospel to people- either across the street or across the ocean- *requires* sacrifice and suffering- a losing of life and a denying of self. This is the way Christ means for His saving Afflictions to be taken to the world- through the sufferings of his people.

And what is amazing is that Paul says he rejoices in that. Verse 24:

Colossians 1:24a

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...

I tell you that the Calvary road is a road of deep and lasting Joy. It is a difficult and painful road- but it is also a profoundly happy one. So when we choose the fleeting pleasures of earthly pleasures and comfort and security over the sacrifices and sufferings of missions and evangelism and ministry and love- we are actually choosing against the interests of our own joy. We are choosing broken cisterns that can hold no water and we are rejecting the eternal Spring of water Whose waters never fail (**Isaiah 58:11**).

The happiest people in the whole world are *not* those who live lives of self- indulgence and self- gratifying pleasures- but are those who know the mystery of Christ in them- the hope of glory- which satisfies

their deepest longings and frees them to extend the Sufferings of Jesus Christ through their *own* sufferings to the world.

God is calling all of us in this text to live for the sake of the Gospel and to do that through “joyful suffering”. We must remember that Jesus Christ *chose* suffering- it didn't just happen to Him. And we must also remember that the saints in **Hebrews 11**- *refused* to accept deliverance from their sufferings- even when that deliverance was *offered* to them. And the reason why they refused deliverance was:

Hebrews 11:35b

... so that they might obtain a better resurrection;

Jesus chose Suffering as the Way to create and perfect the Church. And now He calls us to choose suffering and not accept deliverance- so that we might obtain a better resurrection. So Jesus calls us to take up our Cross and follow him on the Calvary road and deny ourselves and make sacrifices for the sake of presenting His Suffering to the world and ministering to the Church.

I recently heard an amazing way of saying this from the Romanian pastor and mission leader- Joseph Tson. He said,

"Christ's Cross was for propitiation; ours cross is for propagation."

In other words- Christ suffered to accomplish Salvation. We suffer to spread that same Salvation. And our willingness to endure hardship for the good of others is a “filling up of Christ's afflictions” because it extends them to others and makes them visible.

One of the best illustrations of what I have been preaching to you this morning comes from the singer Michael Card- who tells of a Masai Warrior named Joseph. Card says:

“One day Joseph, who was walking along one of these hot, dirty African roads, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. Then and there he repented and trusted in Jesus as his Lord and Savior. The power of the Spirit began transforming his life; he was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was return to his own village and share that same Good News with the members of his local tribe.

Joseph began going from door-to-door, telling everyone he met about the Cross [suffering!] of Jesus and the salvation it offered, expecting to see their faces light up the way his had. To his amazement the villagers not only didn't care, they became violent. The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

Joseph somehow managed to crawl to a water hole, and there, after days of passing in and out of consciousness, found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception he had received from people he had known all his life. He decided he must have left something out or told the story of Jesus incorrectly. After rehearsing the message he had first heard, he decided to go back and share his faith once more.

Joseph limped into the circle of huts and began to proclaim Jesus. 'He died for you, so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God' he pleaded. Again he was grabbed by the men of the village and held while the women beat him reopening wounds that had just begun to heal. Once more they dragged him unconscious from the village and left him to die.

To have survived the first beating was truly remarkable. To live through the second was a miracle. Again, days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred—and determined to go back.

He returned to the small village and this time, they attacked him before he had a chance to open his mouth. As they flogged him for the third and probably the last time, he again spoke to them of Jesus Christ, the Lord. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was that the women who were beating him began to weep.

This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ.”¹

This is one vivid example of what Paul meant when he said,

I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

¹Michael Card, "Wounded in the House of Friends," *Virtue magazine*, March/April, 1991, pp. 28–29, 69.

There is something profoundly freeing and stabilizing in knowing that Christ calls us to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel. It stabilizes us from being thrown off guard when it comes. And it frees us to choose it when love beckons us. And it begins to free us from the incredible seduction of American prosperity.

I end with this. It is almost impossible for modern Americans to come to terms with Jesus' commendation of the widow who

Luke 21:4b

... out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on

But Jesus actually praised this widow woman. He didn't accuse her of irresponsibility or of not “putting up for a rainy day”. The Lord praised this poor widow for her sacrifice for the Cause of God. Now to see this kind of sacrifice fleshed out in real life may require that we leave America and go elsewhere. Stanford Kelly illustrates it from Haiti.

“The church was having a Thanksgiving festival and each Christian was invited to bring a love offering. One envelope from a Haitian man named Edmund held \$13 cash. That amount was three months' income for a workingman there. Kelly was as surprised as those counting a Sunday offering in the United States might be to get a \$6,000 cash gift. He looked around for Edmund, but couldn't see him.

Later Kelly met him in the village and questioned him. He pressed him for an explanation and found that Edmund had sold his horse in order to give the \$13 gift to God for the sake of the Gospel. But why hadn't he come to the festival? He hesitated and didn't want to answer.

Finally Edmund said, ‘I had no shirt to wear.’”²

So what we are seeing so far in this New Year is that God is calling us to prepare ourselves for suffering- not simply because of the moral effects of purification and refining; and not only because of the intimacy factor of going deeper with Jesus and knowing him better; but also because what is lacking in the Afflictions of Jesus Christ must be

² Norm Lewis, *Priority One: What God Wants* (Orange, California: Promise Publishing, 1988), p. 120.

filled up by those who take those sufferings to the world and show the loving sacrifice of Christ through the loving sacrifices of His people.

Let's pray