

***Introduction...The Character of Gospel Ministry***

**Col 1:24** Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup> 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, <sup>26</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

**Suffering and joy are two words that don't often go together in the human experience. Suffering and sorrow work together, comfort and joy go together; but not suffering and joy.** Perhaps we can understand joy in the midst of suffering, or we might attempt to cling to some joyful thought as we are enduring suffering; but rejoicing *in* suffering, well that's just weird.

Paul's statement here is counter-cultural. It is contrary to our normal human experience; **this is counter-human.** Either this man is mentally unstable or there is some set of values within the Christian life that run contrary to the values of the world around us. Just so that I'm clear I don't think Paul is mentally unstable.

The Kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom. While the world values power, strength, wealth and notoriety the church of Christ values humility, charity, faith in the strength of another, and sacrificial love. In the days of the early church, as the message of Christ spread to new cities it became obvious to the people that the Christian message overturned the normal course of the world.

This was the testimony of the men of Thessalonica when Paul came to town. **Acts 17:6** These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also,

The upside-down kingdom of Christ spread like fire through the Roman Empire during the 1<sup>st</sup> century, taking root in the people's hearts, upsetting accepted cultural norms **but the world had a strategy for putting a stop to it, persecution.** When things got out of control in Jerusalem, Rome clamped down on both the Jews and Christians. When the gospel message reached a new Roman City it was often met with suspicion and those who preached it faced legal opposition.

You would think that a world power like Rome would be able to get a handle on the Christian problem. You would think that persecution and the threat of death would put a stop to the spread of the gospel, **but not for the upside-down kingdom of Christ. In fact, according to Paul, what appeared to be devastating to the spread of Christianity was actually serving to advance it.**

The book of Colossians is a prison epistle most likely written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. He is writing this letter from Rome as a prisoner of the state, but how did he get in that position.

While on his third missionary journey, Paul took a trip through Macedonia (Philippi) at the beginning of **Acts 20:1-6**. After this we know that he spent some time encouraging the Ephesian Elders and then he made his final trip to Jerusalem.

Paul went to Jerusalem to deliver a gift, a collection of money from the Gentile churches, which he had hoped would strengthen the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. But on arrival he became aware of a large number of Jews who were not on board with his missionary methods.

A few days later Paul was apprehended in the temple by a group of Jews from Asia who sought to put him to death on the charge of bringing a Gentile into the court of the Jews. **The charges were false but their zeal was not.** He was then rescued by the Roman authorities as a peacekeeping measure, but this was only the start of his trials.

- From this point he was held in chains in Jerusalem as a Roman prisoner awaiting trial (Acts 22)
- He was made to stand before the Sanhedrin and give an account of himself in what proved to be a pre-trial hearing (Acts 23)
- Then he was transported to Caesarea to avoid being murdered by another group of Jews who had plotted against him (Acts 23)
- While in Caesarea for two years he would stand trial before Felix, Festus and Agrippa before exercising his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. These two years were spent in bondage as a prisoner of the state (Acts 24-26).
- When he left Caesarea he spent months at Sea during the worst time of the year and his cruise ended in shipwreck off the coast of Malta (Acts 27).
- Finally, after more than three years he arrived at Rome only to be kept in custody for another two, while awaiting trial as an insurrectionist, a charge punishable by death (Acts 28). During those two years in Rome Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Philemon and Colossians. So this brief catalogue of trials is the suffering that he refers to in verse 24. In other letters we get an even more vivid picture of **what had happened to Paul** in the cause of Christ. **2 Corinthians 11:24-28** Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I

was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Many who study the life of Paul are left with the conclusion that this man was either delusional or he was a masochist. Many would say that Paul should have abandoned his ministry because it would appear that he was an utter failure. Hated by the Jews, loathed by

the Gentiles; Paul was a marked man who spent the better part of five years in a Roman prison. **It would appear that Rome had succeeded in silencing this man, but things aren't always what they seem in the upside-down kingdom.**

**Philippians 1:12** I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, <sup>13</sup> so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. <sup>14</sup> And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

<sup>15</sup> Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. <sup>16</sup> The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. <sup>17</sup> The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup> What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Why is that Paul can rejoice in his suffering? Because he knew something that the Romans did not. He knew that God has chosen the foolish in this world to confound the wise. He knew that God has chosen the weak to overpower the strong (**I Cor 1:27**). **He also knew that his suffering was not in vain, but was for the sake of the church. If the state was opposing Paul's work it was because Paul's labor was bearing fruit for the upside- down kingdom of God.**

### ***Transition...***

Now, all that I have just shared with you should serve as the backdrop to this next section of the book of Colossians. This section (**1:24-2:5**) marks a shift in the letter, a shift that takes us from what Christ has done to reconcile us to God to what gospel ministers do to extend that reconciliation to others. From reconciled to reconciler, this is the pattern of the Christian life but especially for those serving in gospel ministry.

At the end of verse 23 Paul let us know that he had become a minister of the gospel.

He calls himself a servant of the gospel (διδάκονος). He is a courier who serves by carrying the message of God wherever he goes and communicating that message to all who will listen. In His day, Paul was the foremost champion of the gospel in the world. He travelled throughout the Roman empire preaching Christ, planting churches, training other ministers and discipling believers who would join him in spreading the good news to the ends of the earth.

Paul saw great success on the mission field. He was blessed to see people converted under his ministry, to see churches established under his leadership, and to see the gospel advance in the world to the point that in **Romans 15** he wrote, "I no longer have any room for work in these regions."

**But his ministry was not without its difficulties. The same can be said for gospel ministry today. While the external circumstances have changed a bit, the foundational character of Christian ministry has not and here in this passage Paul is going to give us 8 Characteristics of gospel ministry which we will be studying over**

**the next few weeks. This morning we are going to look at 2 of these characteristics and both of them are found in verse 24.**

### ***Sermon Focus...***

**I. The Spirit of Gospel Ministry (v. 24)** Col 1:24 Now I *rejoice* in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up

what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,

**The spirit of gospel ministry is one of joy** and this outlook was modeled by Christ himself. "For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross despising it's shame (**Heb 12:2**).” Yes, I know Jesus was a man of sorrows but beneath it all was a deep seated joy that was more powerful than the day to day circumstances of life.

Perhaps it would be accurate to say that Jesus wasn't happy about the cross, who would be. But joy and happiness are not the same thing. If we view emotion as a sliding scale, then it is easy for us to see that our emotions will fluctuate depending on what is happening to us at the moment.

**(Appli...** If I bring a box of donuts into the house my kids will all of a sudden become happy. If I bring flowers home to my wife her emotional state tends to swing toward happiness. We have all experienced this to some degree.

John MacArthur writes: 'Happiness is an attitude of satisfaction or delight that is based upon some present circumstance.'<sup>1</sup> The word happiness is related to the word happening, or happenstance. Our degree of happiness is directly related to what is happening in our lives at the moment. And because of this happiness is a fickle thing.

But joy, on the other hand is an emotional state that is not tied to circumstances. Joy, understood Biblically, refers to a deep sense of confidence that all is well, no matter what the circumstance of life may be.

Joy is not on the sliding scale of emotions but rather it is a steadfast, immovable satisfaction of the deepest longing of the soul. It goes beyond circumstances and is able to say, "To live is Christ and to die is gain (**Phil 1:21**).” For the Christian, joy is the internal confidence that says, “I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (**Rom 8:28f**).”

The gospel is the root of our joy and as ministers of the gospel we have to understand that our joy is not tied to performance but to faithfulness. Joy in ministry is not tied to worldly success. It is tied to faithful service to our redeemer God. Joy in ministry is not tied to worldly success it is tied to faithful service to Christ, His mission and His people.

This brings us to the 2<sup>nd</sup> characteristic of gospel ministry

**II. The Suffering of the Gospel Ministry (V. 24)Col 1:24** Now I *rejoice* in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up

what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,

Paul is clear that he sees his suffering as a benefit to the church. He says it is **for your sake** and **for the sake of his body**. But what does he mean when he says that he is filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Let’s first point out what he is not saying.

Paul is not saying that we (ministers or saints) do anything to add to the saving work of Christ. There is no redemptive power in my suffering for you. All that was needed for our salvation was accomplished by Christ alone. He paid the full price for our sins and supplies us with all that we need to be reconciled to God forever, Paul has already made that point clear.

The Catholic church uses this passage to prop up its doctrine of purgatory, prayers to the saints and the practice of indulgences. But Paul is not teaching that through suffering we add something to the redemptive work of Christ. **But what is he saying?**

**Paul understands that his mission is that there is one thing lacking in the sufferings of Jesus and it is the presentation or proclamation of Christ’s sacrificial love to the people for whom He died.** The only thing lacking is that there are still people who have not yet heard or seen the gospel and so Paul sees his missionary work and the subsequent suffering at the hands of Christ’s enemies as working to complete the sufferings of Christ.

John Piper explains it in this way, “Christ intends for the great commission to be a **presentation** to the nations of the sufferings of His cross through the suffering of His people...that’s the way it will be finished. If you sign up for the Great Commission, that’s what you sign up for.” Those who wish to represent Christ and serve His church must be willing to suffer for His name.

When ministers of the gospel suffer for faithfully preaching the gospel, two things are bound to happen:

1. The elect, those for whom Christ died, will be called to salvation as an application of the sacrificial suffering of Christ.
2. Those present will witness a sample of the suffering poured out on Jesus. They will see a picture of Christ, in the picture of our suffering.

### **Conclusion...**

Some will say that Christian suffering shows Christian weakness, but there is another side to this. God has a habit of working in such a way that he accomplishes his purpose through weakness, because the upside down kingdom of Christ has a totally different pattern, a totally different set of values and a totally different power, than the right side up kingdom of this world.

**(Illus.** In the book of Exodus, the people of Israel were in bondage as slaves to the most powerful nation on the planet. Moses, a murderous, stuttering outcast was chosen to be the deliverer who would stand before Pharaoh and demand the release of the Jews. But through this weak man, God brought Pharaoh to his knees.

But do you remember how he did it? God warned of the last plague that was to come, the destroyer who would take the life of every first born son in the land. This destroyer was unstoppable and Pharaoh’s army was powerless against him. He swept through Egypt in the night and without any opposition he took the life of every first born son in Egypt. But do you remember what kept this unstoppable force from destroying the Israelites?

The most insignificant animal in the herd; a defenseless, helpless little lamb. What seemed weak was the only thing that could hold back God’s messenger of death. Every home in Egypt that night either had a dead son in it or the blood of the lamb on it. You see it was the lamb of God who covered the sins of the people and kept death from their door.

The greatest and most powerful army in the ancient world could not stop the destroyer whom God sent, but the blood of the lamb did. **What looks like weakness is actually an unfathomable power in the upside-down kingdom.**

**(Illus.** Fast forward 1500 years to the time of Christ, whom John the Baptist called “the

lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Christ taught a system of values that turned the world’s pattern upside down, and for that he was nailed to a Roman cross.

The cross was nothing if not a warning to the world of just how weak they are in comparison to the power of Rome. The cross was a tool of torture and humiliation and served as a deterrent for anyone who might get the idea of trying to start a revolution. Jesus, the son of God, hung upon a Roman cross and died.

But, what appeared to be folly, what appeared to be the end of Christianity, what appeared to be weakness was the wisdom and power of God to save men from sin and to reconcile them back to Himself. **What looked like failure, was actually the greatest victory ever.**

**1 Corinthians 1:18** For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

**You see, Paul knew the pattern of God’s kingdom not only from the past, but also through his own firsthand experience. Because rather than silencing the gospel through imprisonment, Paul’s suffering actually promoted it. He writes this letter while he is still imprisoned, in chains, in Roman custody and uncertain about what he will face next; but as he looks upon his suffering he can rejoice because the gospel is not in chains. The mystery of God has been unleashed to turn the world upside- down.**

<sup>1</sup> J. MacArthur, *The Epistle of Joy Philippians 1:1-; code 50-1* (taken from [www.gty.org](http://www.gty.org))