

Paul's Labor for the Church Col. 1:24-2:5

A truck driver was hauling a load of 500 penguins to the zoo. Unfortunately, his truck broke down. The driver eventually waved down another truck and offered the driver \$500 to take the penguins to the zoo. The next day the first truck driver got his truck fixed and drove into town and couldn't believe his eyes! Just ahead of him he saw the second truck driver crossing the road with the 500 penguins waddling single file behind him. He jumped out of his truck, ran up to the guy and said, "What's going on? I gave you \$500 to take these penguins to the zoo!"

The man responded, "I did take them to the zoo. But I had enough money left over so now we're going to the movies." That guy didn't understand what he was supposed to be doing.

Likewise, some believers become fuzzy about their sense of purpose. We have looked at the beginning of Colossians where Paul reminds the believers what they have in common as well as his authority as an apostle. Then we discovered what Paul was thankful for about the Colossae church even with its heretical bent. Next we studied how Paul interceded for the followers of Jesus there. Then he explained the supremacy of Christ. And our last focus was on our need for Jesus the reconciler.

Today we look at the privilege and the task, as well as the marks of a faithful church. This is through the eyes of Paul's labor for the church. And it starts with this disconcerting sentence. "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church." Paul saw himself as having a **ministry of suffering**.

This is a daring thought, but not a comforting thought. Or is it? Paul thinks of the sufferings through which he is passing, as completing the sufferings of Jesus Christ himself. Paul joyfully and willingly suffered on behalf of others for the sake of the gospel. The little word "now" that starts off verse 24, does more than just

provide a transition. Paul rejoiced precisely because of what he had just written. He's rejoicing while in prison, writing this letter. When we're in pain, we want relief. Paul was different. He found joy in what he suffered.

In 2 Corinthians 7:4 he declares, "In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds." He suffered far more than most of us ever will. Listen to what he writes in 2 Corinthians 11:24-29: "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; I spent a night and a day in the open sea; I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, from bandits, from my own countrymen, from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in the country, at sea; and in danger from false brothers."

We often think of Paul's sufferings as just those of prison, torture, an early death, and this list of experiences he had. But we too often forget, the ending words of this scripture. Paul isn't bragging when he writes: "I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches."

The reality is, we have it easy compared to many followers of Jesus in history and around the world today. Persecution of Christians is as frequent as it's ever been. We don't have to spend a lot of time looking for places where believers are being targeted. For example, some pastors are arrested in Vietnam, on phony charges, simply so the police can make a little extra income. We all know what occurs when ISIS invades a community. There are a number of countries where it's illegal to witness and convert. Our faith tradition has theological reasons to highlight a book of people being persecuted, tortured & killed, the Martyrs Mirror.

Dr. Helen Roseveare (1925-2016), a British medical doctor, served more than 20 years in the Congo, Africa (1953-1973) with World-wide Evangelization Crusade. For twelve and

a half years she had a frenetic but generally wonderful time serving as the only doctor to an area containing more than half a million people. But in 1964, revolution overwhelmed the country, and she and her coworkers were thrown into five and a half months of almost unbelievable brutality and torture.

On one occasion when Dr. Roseveare was on the verge of being executed, a 17-year-old student came to her defense. He was savagely beaten as a result by being kicked about like a football & left for dead. Helen was sick. For a moment she thought that God had forsaken her, even though she did not doubt his reality.

But God stepped in, overwhelmed her with the sense of his own presence, and said something like this: “20 years ago you asked me for the privilege of being a missionary, the privilege of being identified with me. These are not your sufferings; they are my sufferings.” As the force of that hit home, the doctor said she was overcome with a great sense of privilege. Dr. Helen Roseveare’s sense of identification with Christ, of union with him, was elevated by her suffering, and she rejoiced.

This kind of thinking makes no sense. Or is our life purpose so important to share the Good News of Christ, that anyone who does the work of Jesus, serving the Church, widening her borders, establishing her faith, saving her from errors, and so on, regardless of safety, comfort, wealth & status, is doing the work of Almighty God? If ministry involves suffering and sacrifice, it’s not a penalty but a privilege, because we share in the work of the Holy Spirit

And yet too often, our petty squabbles, injured pride, lack of servanthood, laziness and desire for comfort, get in the way of being all out for Jesus. So instead of rejoicing in suffering, we too often run away from the hard work we need to do to lift up the kingdom and its values. Or we gripe about difficult personal relationships.

Too often I have to remind myself to not be like the queue ball in pool. One of the most frustrating things that happens some times is,

my queue ball gets in the way of where I want the other ball to go. How often are we the real problem – especially when we are pointing to others, when we get in God’s way? It is right to not want to suffer, but our own avoidance of talking about tough issues, our fear of the legal system, and our over worry about what others might think – causes stress and often diverts us from our primary purpose as followers of Jesus.

We need to remember that not all Paul’s problems came from the government. Many who travel a lot for work, like Paul did, will tell you it’s over rated. We know he had internal church issues & relationships to deal with like the Gnostic heresy in the early church. And we know some Jewish religious leaders caused lots of trouble for him in various cities where he preached. So his suffering was multi-faceted.

I’ve had Christians tell me they wonder about me doing interim pastoring – no job security. I’ve had Christians tell me – they would never allow their children to go be a missionary, much less overseas. I’ve had debates with people about the cost effectiveness of saving one person from hell. There are the endless conversations around the seven last words of the church, “We’ve never done it that way before” with the clear implication, we will do that over my dead body! And I’m sad to say I’ve known a few people who have not been able to forgive – even when I’m convinced not just their spiritual life, but their physical life and relationships depended on it.

In some sense I’ve always thought – death and persecution is easy compared to the challenges of daily holy living. We generally clearly know who the bad guys are. But it might be tougher to make the right choices, grow Christ like attitudes, and follow that prompting of the Holy Spirit. – day in, day out, every day. Maybe we should embrace and rejoice in suffering more than we do instead of focus on rights, personal peace and comfort?

The reality is, Paul is not the faithful Christian exception. He is really the norm. He found joy in what he suffered. Why? Because he was

carrying out the task Jesus had given him. He wanted to warn everyone, to teach everybody, and to help bring every person into complete faith, love and trust in Jesus. That was his purpose. He had sold himself out to Jesus. He considered himself a slave to Jesus. Paul was in love with his labor for the church. We could all be more inspired by his example.

And church history tells us, repeatedly, the gospel grows when it's under pressure. Just two examples. Everyone was worried about what would happen to the church in China when the missionaries were kicked out in 1949. The Communist government discovered – they could not and are not today suppressing the church, despite their fears and efforts. And Ethiopia is a more recent story. As the church was and is being persecuted, unsurprisingly, it grows!

Paul then goes on in our text to talk about his **ministry of preaching** the mystery that is now disclosed to the Lord's people. The false teachers in Colossae believed that spiritual perfection was a hidden plan, or mystery, that only a few privileged people could discover. Of course this secret knowledge gave them power & influence over others. But Paul openly defines this mystery as God calling all people, both Jews and Gentiles, to faith in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 3:6 makes the mystery clear: "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The mystery is Christ in us, the hope of glory. I continue to be amazed at how God allows me to experience salvation through Christ. I hope you do also.

In verses 25 to 29 Paul gives us his goals for preaching. And to remind us – most preaching is not from the pulpit. It's from our daily lives as we are living witnesses of the hope of glory. Paul's life is a sermon and a message to us.

First we **suffer joyfully** for the gospel as we just talked about. Some times I think, maybe I'm not being faithful enough if I'm not

suffering! Sounds crazy doesn't it? And it is. But I think it's worth cogitating and praying on.

Next, we are **servants by the commission** God gives each one of us. Verse 25. Please don't shy away from your call. The word servant can be translated – minister. The current excuse for not being involved in ministry is, I have to give time to the family. It's a modern believer's idol. How can you argue with someone who says they need to give time to family, instead of be involved in a ministry? And I have a sense that some of the regular church trouble makers, are those who ignore their servant call to some kind of ministry. So they grow a track record of trying to lead the church, in unhelpful ways.

Another priority Paul gives us for ministry is, helping people, and ourselves, get to the point we can be presented to God with **full maturity** in Christ. Verse 28. I have a mythical list of people who I have worked with, who I'd like to have to form my ideal congregation. Some of them were easy to minister with. Others were not easy to work with. But their maturity - relationally, prayer life, commitment to get things done, and especially spiritual wisdom was clear. Churches run into trouble when they fill slots with spiritually immature members.

Paul points out again that a goal of his is to **"strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me."** Verse 29. This has at least three parts. First, work hard. Second, tap into the power of God, which provides energy and ideas and creativity. Third, no laziness or excuses allowed.

Paul follows up this point with the appeal in the first verse of chapter 2. "I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally." He makes it clear that the work isn't just about himself. It involves, agonizing and struggling and striving for others, as other translations put it. So there is something going on here that's more than simply hard work. It's the heart of love, the desire, for others to know the fullness of the wonderful love of Jesus.

Next we see that Paul is in ministry with the goal of **enriching the lives of others** towards a full understanding of faith. Verse 2. “My goal is to **encourage** people’s hearts and help them be **united in love**, so they may have the full riches of complete understanding.” Being united together is a common theme of Paul’s.

Then he intentionally throws in this phrase to counter the heretical teachers: “in order that you may know the mystery of God, namely Christ.” This is a clear attempt to counter the idea of theological secrets as well as point to the focus of faith in the supreme ruler, Jesus. But Paul is not done yet. He adds, verse 3, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Paul is passionately yearning the best for all believers to not be fooled by alternative views of Christianity and Christ. I suspect the readers in New Testament times, thought these nice sounding words were actually dynamite. And then he takes direct aim at heretical teachers, verse 4, “I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.”

I would add another goal of Paul’s ministry was to **confront** wrong doctrine and unhelpful practices and unhealthy relationships. We know this always draws attention so we often avoid these difficult conversations. But when we let things go – we are not helping ourselves.

Look up the idea of holy fool online. Paul in some respects was a **holy fool** – living foolishly for Christ. When a problem arose, he addressed it. He didn’t play the game of niceness to just get along. Jesus is the same way. Organizations need a few holy fools who perform the valuable role of questioning things. Today we call them whistle blowers. They always seem to be unappreciated because they upset people.

A last goal of Paul’s is mentioned in verse 5. “He wants us to be disciplined and firm in the faith.” It’s being orderly and stable with faith.

Let’s finish up by looking at the concept of suffering again. **Paul suffered for at least**

five reasons. First, he suffered because of Jesus Christ. Second, he suffered because he was committed to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. Third, he was a threat to how the Jews understood the Messiah as well as the required Roman Emperor worship. Fourth, Paul suffered for the sake of Christ’s body, the church. He was passionate about church health and faithfulness. Fifth, as the believers saw him suffer, it gave them courage to face persecution in their lives. These reasons to embrace and be joyful in suffering, when it comes, are still valid today.

To conclude: It seems strange for us to say, **suffering is part of discipleship.** Christ followers are recognized by the trials they endure because they follow a suffering Savior. 1 Peter 4:12 instructs us: “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” It’s why it’s important to honor those who suffer in Christ Jesus’ name.

I think church history and even personal experience teaches us, **we know Jesus best when we suffer with Him.** Philippians 3:10: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in death.”

Suffering is a privilege as we see in 1 Peter 4:13: “But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.”

And **suffering produces greater faith and accelerates character development.** Romans 5:3-4: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Key questions for us to think about this week include: How far are we willing to go in suffering for the gospel? Along with this are companion questions – How passionate will we allow ourselves to get for the gospel of Lord Christ Jesus? What have we learned in what we consider suffering for Creator, Almighty

God? Jesus said, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)