

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

A Glorious Mystery Colossians 1:24-29

Intro: Our text today is the section that begins the body of Paul's letter to the Colossians and, as such, it fits the Pauline pattern of updating the recipients of his letters with details about his personal missionary efforts and his sincere concern for them after his thanksgiving section ([Rom 1:11-15](#); [II Cor 1:8-2:4](#); [Phil 1:12-26](#); [I Thess 2:17-3:11](#)). Not many of the Colossians know Paul personally, so this section acts as a brief personal introduction. Understand, Paul's not trying to establish his apostolic authority here; his authority has already been given ([v1](#)). He is simply expanding on his last statement in [v23](#), "of which I, Paul, became a minister," and emphasizing the divine relation of the mystery of God that he preaches.

Paul's desire and main goal in this section is to give the Colossian believers a renewed confidence in their hope, a hope they received when they heard and accepted the message of the gospel, and to arm them with theological truth with which they may counter and rebuff the superficial arguments of those who try to marginalize the claims of the gospel or promote their own religious superiority. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are to be found in Christ, and no false babblers should persuade them to look elsewhere. Paul also wants to show his care for them. Although he is physically absent from them, he is present with them spiritually. We'll see that he suffers for them ([24](#)), his commission is for them ([25](#)) and he struggles for them ([2:1](#)).

[24](#)- Here is a passage that has caused much consternation in many Bible Study groups over the years as well as plenty of debate among NT scholars. The obvious problem is the question of how Paul makes up for what is lacking in the sufferings or rather, the afflictions of Christ. But before we open up that theological can of worms, there are other issues to deal with. Most noticeable is the now Paul uses here. It seems that the now of our reconciliation that we saw in [21b](#) and the now of the revelation of the mystery of God's plan ([26](#)), hasn't changed the now of Paul's imprisonment. Now he rejoices in his sufferings because of the truths he has been able to outline for them and he links his sufferings directly to his labors for Christ.

The immediate cause of Paul's suffering is his imprisonment, which is both a result of his faithful preaching of the gospel as well as an opportunity to spread the word of God even further ([Phil 1:12](#)). Paul rejoices in his sufferings first of all because they were on account of Jesus. This was the fellowship of His sufferings that he speaks about in [Phil 3:10](#). Like the early apostles, Paul rejoiced that he was counted worthy to suffer shame for His name ([Acts 5:41](#)).

Paul had another reason for rejoicing in sufferings: he's suffering on account of the Gentiles. Paul was the chosen apostle to the Gentiles. In fact, he was a prisoner in Rome precisely because of his love for, and ministry to Gentiles. He was arrested in Jerusalem on false charges and the Jews listened intently to his testimony of defense until he said the word "Gentiles." That word infuriated them and drove them to demand his execution.

Then there is a 3rd reason for his rejoicing, the stated cause in our text: he was suffering for the sake of Christ's body, the church; a work that he will expand on in [v28-29](#). Suffice it to say, Paul rejoices now, in this present age, because he plays a vital part as a servant of the gospel in spreading God's word and helping to move the world closer to the coming kingdom of God. Despite all the suffering his task may bring, it is still an immense privilege, one to which he has been called to by God Himself.

But, what does Paul mean when he talks about filling up in his flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Well, before we talk about what he means, let's establish what he doesn't mean. 1st, Paul is in no way implying that the suffering of Christ on the cross was somehow insufficient for salvation. In fact, nowhere in the NT is afflictions ever used for the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Only the sinless Lamb of God could die for the sins of the world and before He died, he declared His work of atonement to be finished – complete. Neither the Apostle Paul, as great as he was, nor any other apostle or believer could add one iota to the saving work of Christ on the cross.

Also, Paul's not suggesting here that his suffering will somehow limit the suffering of the Colossians specifically or the Church in general. Paul's not saying, "I rejoice in my sufferings because I know you won't have to." No, it's clear from Paul's writings that he believes it is the lot of all Christians to suffer ([1 Thess 3:3](#); [Acts 14:22](#)). He never argues that his sufferings will reduce the amount of suffering his fellow believers must endure. Suffering

comes with the territory of serving in the ministry of the gospel. Paul's goal in ministry is not to fulfill a quota of suffering but to make the word of God fully known. His struggle to accomplish this goal brings suffering in its wake and he understands that these sufferings are not just his own but Christ's as well.

The sacrificial sufferings of Christ are over but His body, the church, still experiences suffering because of its stand for the faith. The Head of the church in heaven feels the sufferings that His people endure. What did the risen Lord say to Saul when He met him on the road to Damascus? Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me ([Acts 9:4](#))? Paul is simply rejoicing in the opportunity to take his turn in sharing these afflictions, knowing that countless others would follow in his footsteps. So it's not Christ's sufferings which are being completed but Christ's sufferings-in-Paul.

In this statement, Paul reflects his concept of unity with Christ. Christians have been buried with Christ, raised together with Him and made alive together with Him. As Christ's "body" the church has a corporate personality. If Christians share in dying and rising with Christ, they also share in His sufferings and He with theirs. Thus, Christ continues to suffer in His body, the church. Paul shows his deeply held conviction that he ministers as one of Christ's representatives. Christ lives in him and he serves on earth in Christ's place as one who died with Him and who lives for Him.

25- Again, Paul identifies himself as a minister (servant). He's a steward commissioned to carry out an assignment for his Master. Stewards of estates in the ancient world were usually slaves. Thus, Paul doesn't view his commission as an appointment to a high office but as the exalted privilege and duty of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. He does recognize it as a divine gift that brings divine power to fulfill it ([28](#)). The same divine power that raised Jesus from the dead ([2:12](#)) gives him the strength to continue to carry out his mission, to endure its toil and strain, and to accept suffering joyfully.

Paul's divine commission, his mandate, was to fulfill the word of God or, to present the word of God in its fullness. This phrase may mean that Paul was charged with preaching the whole counsel of God, with finishing an assignment by making God's word fully known, or with proclaiming God's word so as to set in motion the full effect of its power, as he says in [II Tim](#)

4:17. In Paul's mind, God's word is not fulfill when it is only preached, but when the preaching of it accomplishes the purpose God has for it: when it is heard and produces growth and fruit in the lives of those who respond to it (**5-6**).

God's call to Paul was to service and Paul understood that call in terms of serving the gospel but, more specifically, in terms of serving the Church, the people of God. So Paul sees his suffering both as a sharing in the pain Christ feels with His people and as suffering borne on behalf of the whole Church, of which the Colossians are a part. For Paul, his own afflictions were an integral part of his calling as an apostle. They were the school in which he learned to trust God and the expression of a faith that was willing to walk in the steps of the Lord, even if that path leads to death. It's a fact of Christian discipleship that we face the possibility of suffering as well as the promise of glory.

26-27- A typical sentence written by Paul resembles a series of Russian dolls: the main (or *outer*) clause opens up to reveal a series of subordinate (or *inner*) clauses. This sentence began in v**24** with I now rejoice in my sufferings... fill up in my flesh...for the sake of His body...the church, of which I became a minister...by the stewardship from God...to fulfill the word of God...the mystery. Paul here defines the word of God as the mystery and he wants the Colossians to know what it is (**2:2**).

In modern terminology, a mystery refers to a whodunit or an unsolvable puzzle. In the pagan religious environment of Colosse, it referred to information about initiation rites and symbols—things to be kept hidden from the uninitiated. But Paul uses it strictly from a Jewish perspective. In Judaism, a mystery is something related to God's purposes, which can only be imparted by divine revelation. Humans can't know or discover this mystery on their own, no matter how clever they might be. The term appears in **Daniel 2** where it refers to King Nebuchadnezzar's dream; a mystery that God revealed to Daniel. Paul uses it to refer to truth about God's and His plan of salvation that had remained hidden in the past but that had now been revealed.

For centuries no one, not even generations of faithful Jews, guessed the course that God was heading. All that God intended to do was quite inconceivable to human minds. The mystery went against all human reason

simply because it was above all human reason. In the NT, the mystery has been revealed and understood. In fact, God calls apostles to make it known to all who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Abraham got a preview of it ([Gal 3:8](#)) and the prophets caught glimpses of it ([1 Pt 1:10](#)); but the apostles lived in the time of its fulfillment and were the first to unveil its glory fully. Instead of guarding this secret from others, they proclaimed it to the entire world. God didn't call Christians to have a monopoly on the truth but to share it with others.

So, what is this mystery? The key element of it in our text is that the riches of God's glory are among the Gentiles – Christ in you! What made this so mysterious to the Jews was their strongly held conviction that the adoption as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law and the promises ([Rom 9:4](#)) belong to Israel exclusively. Even the Messiah belonged to the race of Israel (v5) and most took for granted that His purpose in coming was to restore glory and privilege to Israel. Christ among the Gentiles and for the Gentiles seriously undermined the expectations of most Jews. At best, it seemed to be a betrayal. If true, God was acting in contradiction to an agreed course of action.

However, the mystery that was revealed to Paul was that God intended to save the Gentiles from the very beginning. Jesus came to earth, was rejected by His people the Jews and crucified. He arose again and returned to heaven. Did this mean that God's promised kingdom for Israel was now abandoned? No, God just initiated a new program that wasn't explained to the OT prophets. Christ...among the Gentiles wasn't Plan B after the gospel was rejected by the Jews. Instead, it was God's eternal purpose. [Eph 2:15b-16](#) explains this divine purpose in detail. The mystery is that today God is uniting Jews and Gentiles into one body, the church. When the church is completed, Christ will return and take His people home. Then He will again deal with Israel as a nation and establish the promised kingdom.

This would have been startling news to the Jews but imagine what it meant to the Gentiles! They were no longer excluded from the glory and riches of God's grace. During OT times, a Gentile had to become a Jewish proselyte in order to share in the blessings of Israel. But in the NT, Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by faith in Jesus Christ. There is no difference! ([Rom 10:12](#)) Before Gentiles were outside the covenants of God, now they're members of His family. Once they were living in spiritual ignorance and death, now

they're alive and sharing in the riches of God's wisdom in Christ. Once they had no hope, now they have a glorious hope because of the abiding presence of Christ.

Paul rejoices because God has chosen him to make this mystery known to Gentiles everywhere. Even though it has cost him an enormous toll in suffering, Paul rejoices to be an active participant in God's astounding plan for creation and he accomplished his task through the activities of preaching, warning and teaching...

28- The word preach means to announce with authority as a herald and, of course, the focus of Paul's preaching wasn't himself, his opinions or lots of entertaining stories; he preached Jesus! But, Paul didn't just preach; he also warned (admonished). While it's good to proclaim positive truth, it's also necessary to warn: 1) the lost of judgment to come and 2) God's people of the lies of the enemy. The Greek word for warn means to impart understanding or to lay on the mind or heart. The stress is on influencing not just the intellect but the will and disposition as well. The word describes a basic means of education. The work of warning was a passion for Paul in his ministry. It is also the job of church leaders (**I Thess 5:12**) and the congregation in general (**3:16**), provided they're able to do so (**Rom 15:14**).

But Paul was also concerned with teaching the truth. The verb and its corresponding nouns are often used in the NT to refer to the authoritative communication of gospel truth. It's not enough to warn people; we must also teach them the positive truths of God's word. Paul not only preached Christ, he also taught Christ for in Him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (**2:3**). Wisdom is simply the correct use of knowledge. False teachers promised to give the people a hidden wisdom that would make them spiritually elite but all true spiritual wisdom is found only in Jesus.

Paul's goal for all his preaching, warning and teaching was to present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. The Greek idea of perfection as something without a flaw or as some self-acquired moral virtue influences our modern concept of the term. So, most people think perfection is some impossible ideal that no one could ever attain. But, for the Jew, something was perfect if it fulfilled its purpose. Those who are wholehearted, sincere and in right relationship to God are described as being perfect in Scripture. Christ's work in His people is to present us holy in His sight, without any blemish and free

from accusation (22). This holiness is connected to being established and firm in one's faith (23). Paul has the same goal: to bring people to maturity in Christ. He doesn't offer a 10-step program to some kind of spiritual nirvana way off in the ether. Whoever belongs to the exalted Christ and has an unwavering trust that He is Lord over all other powers and forces will be perfect in Christ. Perfection can be found in nothing, or no one else.

Notice, also, the repetition of every man (everyone) in 28 to emphasize the glorious inclusiveness of the gospel. Just as no part of the universe is left untouched by Christ's redemption, so the church's saving mission extends to all humankind. The gospel breaks through all ethnic discrimination, all religious exclusivism and all intellectual pride, denying entry into this perfection to no one who submits to Christ. It means every person we encounter; every one God brings into the scope of our personal Christian ministry is a likely candidate for this same perfection. It also means that no part of Christian teaching is earmarked for only select few. All the truth of God is for all the people of God so that we might reach all the world for God. Everyone is to become mature in Christ, not just a privileged few.

29- Again, Paul returns to his struggles in ministry but this time it's not affliction or suffering he references but to the effort involved in reaching his desired goal. He labors and strives relentlessly to bring all believers to maturity in Christ. We all know what it means to labor, or at least we should; but the root of striving can mean to compete in the games; it carries the idea of an athletic contest. Nobody strives, sweats or exerts more energy than a successful athlete: to the point of exhaustion. Paul's saying that he doesn't go about his ministry half-heartedly, vaguely hoping that grace will fill in the gaps that he's unable to get to himself. No, Paul is willing to go the distance to fulfill his divine calling; in prayer, in privations or in prison – in service, in suffering or in sacrificing his own life. Paul just won't quit!

Still, at the same time, Paul acknowledges that he doesn't accomplish his ministry under or through his own power but according to His working which works in me mightily. The combination of these 3 words is found nowhere else in the NT. Again, Paul stacks up words referring to power: with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me or according to His energy that is energized in me in power. The aim is to balance necessary human effort with the enabling grace of God in Christ. Paul recognizes that all his work would be of little effect if was not done through the power of Christ. The

labor is Paul's but the energy is Christ's. Paul is most himself when he least relies of his own resources. On the one hand, Paul can say I labored more abundantly than they all (I Cor 15:10) but at the same time, what he accomplishes in his ministry is always and only through Christ who strengthens me (Phil 4:13b).

None of us are called to be apostles but each Christian has a God-given ministry. We can share the gospel and be soul-winners; we can suffer for Christ and fulfill the ministry He's given us. And, just like Paul, our task is hard, but our resources are infinite because they come from God. Are you fulfilling your God-given ministry?