



Sermon Growth Guide

July 21, 2024

Filling the Gaps



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Colossians 1:24-2:5

Key Verse: Colossians 1:24: 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.

Big Idea: Our sufferings are not wasted in this world, but bring glory to God and healing to others.

Foundations

In this series, we've been exploring how Christ is more than enough for us and our world. Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians to both encourage them for their faithfulness but to also correct false teaching that had infiltrated into the Colossian church. This false teaching suggested that in addition to the saving work of Jesus Christ, more needed to be added to bring about completeness and enlightenment. These extra things included obeying the Old Testament Law with a focus on human effort earning righteousness before God, along with embracing knowledge and philosophy to take a person to a higher level of understanding. In short, the false teachers claimed that Jesus was insufficient and more was needed.

Paul offered a counterargument that Christ was quite sufficient and that the new life in Christ was more than adequate. It was, in fact, more than enough! Even so, there are still people in Christian churches today that believe at some level that human works are still needed to earn God's favor and righteousness. There is only one Savior who is the antidote for a sin-sick world, and that is Jesus Christ, God's Son and our Savior.

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Colossians 1:24-2:5 What do you hear, observe, notice in this passage? What questions emerge from this passage? What is the mystery he keeps referring to? What is Paul's main message?

Applying God's Word

Paul's joy and desire is that each believer would grow into a fully mature follower of Christ. How does this passage help us understand the path to Christian maturity?

Witnessing God's Word

Paul rejoices in his suffering. As a servant of Christ, his (and our) suffering has a redemptive arc. How might your suffering help you become more compassionate, loving or vulnerable with your neighbor? Pray for those you know who are suffering and ask God to use your woundedness to minister to those who are hurting.

Last Saturday night, I was sitting in the airport in Baltimore waiting to fly home. Where were you when President Trump was shot? Thank God it wasn't worse for him, but Corey Comperatore lost his life and others are struggling to recover. This is one of those events that we all will remember where we were when. The world is not as it should be. Christians use the word sin to describe the twistedness of a world bent on running away from God. People don't love that word. Another way to put it is this: there is something wrong in this world and it needs to be fixed. What you think that is, what is wrong, and how it gets fixed, these will determine how you go about life. What I want you to know, and what this passage teaches us this morning, that God is a God who gives us More than Enough to endure the struggles of this life. God is at work making things better. God is aware of the broken places and the cracks in the foundation. God is Filling the Gaps.

There are four questions everybody has an answer to already whether they know it or not. They are living their lives based on their answers to these four questions even if they don't know how to articulate their answers. Four questions: (1) Where did I come from? (2) Why am I here? (3) What is wrong in the world? And (4) How does it get fixed? Your answers to these provide the basis for your worldview, the lenses you look through to process life and events and make decisions. If you don't have these straight, you can wind up headed down some dark alleys. We believe we are created by God, for a life of purpose and meaning, to find forgiveness and live for Jesus in a fallen and sin-sick world, because it only gets fixed by the power of Jesus Christ. Politics won't fix it. Economics won't fix it. Education won't fix it. Violence won't fix it, only Jesus.

"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." (Colossians 1:24)

This is a weird verse. I have never quite known what to do with it. First, because Paul says again how much he loves to suffer, and I don't get that! "I rejoice in my sufferings." Really? Okay. We'll come back to that. But it is the next phrase that I struggle to understand:

"I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions." I wrestle with this because it sounds like there is incompleteness to the suffering of Christ, and I believe in what theologians might call the sufficiency of Christ's atoning work on the cross. What does that mean? That means there is no undone sacrifice remaining in order for you and me to receive forgiveness for our sins. Christ has done it. Christ has accomplished it.

In the old covenant, the priest took a lamb to the altar and the blood covered over the people's sins but then he went to get another one. There were more sins to be covered. When Christ came, He made Himself the perfect sacrifice. He made an altar out of the Roman cross and poured out His sinless blood, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and on the cross He said, "It is finished!" As it says, "But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." (Hebrews 10:12) The work was done, the atoning sacrifice was complete, the forgiveness of sins was won, once and for all, for any who call on His name. For all who would receive this gift and repent of their sins and ask for forgiveness, it is here. You are forgiven. There is no sin that is not covered by the blood of Christ. There is no further sacrifice you need to make. Jesus paid it all. Now there will still be consequences of sin. This is a little dark, but there is an old illustration of a man who jumped from a high building to take his own life, and then regretted it. "Lord, forgive me!" God said, "I forgive you! Ten floors to go." If you murdered someone, you go to jail. If you cheated on your wife, you may lose that marriage. If you committed fraud at work, you will lose that job. But you are forgiven. Before God in heaven the charges have been dropped, the debt has been paid, eternal life is yours in Christ.

So, whatever we are to understand here, it is not talking about some unpaid debt of sacrifice we need to provide to gain forgiveness. Christ has atoned for our sins. It is complete. That's the gospel. So, what is it talking about? Well, it is the suffering of the Church, the Body of Christ. Paul's own suffering is part of the continuing suffering of Christ's Body here on earth, the Church. See, Jesus suffered in His flesh. The world attacked Him and despised Him. He was arrested and beaten

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and crucified. That body was buried and then was resurrected, and that body is now in Heaven at the right hand of the Father. But now we, the Church, we are the Body of Christ here and He is our Head. The world attacks us with all the vitriol it once poured out on Jesus. That's exactly what Paul used to do. Paul was a persecutor of the Church. He oversaw the stoning of Stephen. He chased people down and had them yanked out of their houses and beaten and arrested and killed, and while he was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples, it says, he was headed toward Damascus when, "suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." (Acts 9:3-5) When you persecute the church, says Jesus, you land your blows on me. You persecute me. Now Paul knows this. We, the Church, are representing Jesus when we suffer. So, he rejoices when it happens. It reminds him that he is one with Jesus Christ. Completing the sufferings.

Paul serves the church with gratitude. "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness." (Colossians 1:25) If you don't mind me taking a minute, this is the call for all of us pastors. This is what it means to be ordained. We give our lives to the service of the Church, to present the Word of God in its fullness. That's my calling, and while I was away this summer, I hit the 25-year mark of my own ordination. July 11, 1999, was when I knelt to take on this commission. Like Paul, I can say it is a life full of blessings and not without challenges, but I am grateful for it with all my heart.

And what is this Word of God? Look. "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people." (Colossians 1:25-26) Which is what? The mystery. What is the mystery, hidden and now disclosed, hiding in the Old Testament, proclaimed in the New, in the old concealed in the new revealed, the Word of God in its

fullness? What is it? The Word of God "...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27) Christ in you. That's the fullness, that's the Word we proclaim. That is the good news of the gospel. Not a system of doctrine or a philosophy of life or a pattern of behavior—a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who can live in you. "He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." (Colossians 1:28) We preach Christ. I preach Christ for you. We preach Jesus or we preach nothing at all. So that, what? "So that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." We are not here to make big churches; we are here to make big people. Big people full of big faith in a big Savior. If we preach, we preach Jesus, or we preach nothing at all. That's the "so that."

But there is one more "so that" as we pitch into the next chapter. So that others may know. "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. My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ." (Colossians 2:1-2) Christ has come into your life in order to use you to reach others who do not yet know Him. So that they may know. That's why we contend. That's why we struggle. That's why we keep proclaiming the fullness of the Word—Jesus Christ—not under our own power, but under the power of the Holy Spirit. "To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me." (Colossians 1:29)

The mission of the church is a mission of suffering. Did you know that? We don't promote that too much! Maybe you came to Christ to find fulfillment. You do. All the longings of the human soul come home to Him. Your life has meaning and purpose, forgiveness and new possibilities, eternal life, love, joy, peace, all of that in Jesus! But maybe nobody told you it is also an invitation to suffering. The mission of the church is a mission of suffering. We don't use that for a mission statement. You don't put that on a t-shirt. We didn't go with "Suffering for the City." We went with "Light and Life for the City!" It's an

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awkward invitation, but it is true. Jesus suffered in His body. Now we are the body. We stand in the gap, like Ezekiel 22:30, “I looked for someone among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap.” So long as we are the Body of Christ in a fallen world, we stand in the gap. So long as we wait for the full peace of the Kingdom, we will suffer the afflictions of Christ. There will be assassin’s bullets. There will be wars and rumors of wars. There will be cancer, and mental health breakdowns, and broken marriages, and corrupt powers, and we will feel ourselves participating in the continuing afflictions of Christ.

How can Paul say he rejoices in that? “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.” (Colossians 1:24). How is that? Paul knows the suffering is for a purpose. He knows it means he is one with Christ, so united with Christ that the attacks on Jesus are hitting his own life. He knows it means God is doing something. When the church suffers in the gap it means God is at work; the disinfectant is stinging the wound; the cure is attacking the illness. Every bit of suffering means God is at work redeeming the world through us. That’s how Paul rejoices. He knows, too, that every time he is pushed, he will be pushed into the strong arms of Jesus to “strenuously contend” not by his own power but by the power of the energy of Christ working so powerfully in him. That’s why he rejoices. And finally, he can rejoice, because he knows, the worst that this world has to bring is nothing compared to the eternal weight of glory coming in eternal life with Jesus. Stand in the gap. Jesus went to the cross to stand in the gap, suspended between Heaven and Earth. Now we stand in the gap for Jesus. Because He came and died and rose again, He has the power to fill every gap in His time.

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