

WHAT IT MEANS TO SERVE CHRIST  
COLOSSIANS 1:24-29

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Today is the anniversary of D-Day. Seventy-seven years ago 156,000 Allied troops landed on a fifty mile stretch of beaches in Normandy, France. (PROJECTOR ON--- D-DAY) This was a major effort to regain Europe, which had largely been occupied by Nazi Germany.

The invasion came with a great cost. On the first day alone it is estimated that 2500 Americans were killed along with over 1900 troops from other Allies, mostly British and Canadian. Over the next several weeks the Normandy Campaign suffered 210,000 total casualties with an estimated 53,000 soldiers killed. A total of 127 Allied planes were lost. The Royal Navy lost 24 warships. There were an estimated 15-20,000 French civilians who were killed. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Was the operation worth the cost? Most of us would agree that it was. It was necessary to stop an evil regime and to halt a reign of terror that threatened to dominate the world. We should recognize, however, that doing the right thing, that promoting truth and righteousness, usually comes with a cost. That is especially true for us who claim to be followers of Jesus. For we follow One who achieved His greatest victory by dying on a cross.

There is a cost involved in serving Christ. Often it seems like committed Christians face more than their fair share of difficulties. The Apostle Paul wrote (2 TIMOTHY 3:12) in 2 Timothy #3 v. 12, **“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”** What are we to make of that? The passage before us this morning suggests some answers.

We have been looking at Paul’s letter to the Colossians in the New Testament. We have seen so far that the apostle was writing while he was a prisoner in Rome to this small church in a small town in western Asia Minor. (COLOSSAE MAP) These Christians were faced with a danger from false teachers. So Paul is trying to explain some of the basics of the Christian faith. He is especially stressing the sovereignty of Christ.

In the verses before us today Paul is talking about himself. The Christians at Colossae had not met him personally. So he is explaining some things about his situation and his apostolic authority that qualifies him to counter the false teaching of the heretics at Colossae. In the process of doing that he gives us key insights into what it means to serve Christ.

I.

First, in v. 24 of #1 Paul describes THE COST IN SERVING CHRIST. (THE COST IN SERVING CHRIST) He writes, **“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.”**

A couple of years earlier, Jews in the temple in Jerusalem stirred up a riot and almost had Paul killed. They didn't like him because of the message that he preached. The Roman army interceded and put him in prison. They had trouble figuring out what charges to bring against him. But because they didn't want to offend the Jewish leaders, they kept him in prison. Paul exercised his right of appeal as a Roman citizen, and he was sent to Rome to be tried there. So at the time of this writing he was a prisoner under house arrest.

In 2 Corinthians #11 vv. 24-28 he catalogues other experiences of suffering. (2 CORINTHIANS 11: 24-25) He says, **“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 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; (1 CORINTHIANS 11:26) 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; (1 CORINTHIANS 11:27-28) in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches..”**

The apostle in v. 24 in our passage says that such sufferings were for the sake of the Colossian Christians and the church of Christ in general. What did he mean by that? It seems to me that there were at least four things that could have been in his mind when he wrote these words.

**First**, he could have been talking about the fact that there was a certain amount of suffering that was inherent in the work of bringing these people the gospel. At the time of Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, the Lord Jesus spoke to the disciple Ananias about Paul. (ACTS 9:16) According to Acts #9 v. 16, Jesus said, **“...I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”** In doing his work of evangelism Paul suffered for the sake of those who would become Christians. He had to live an itinerant lifestyle. He often went without material comforts. He encountered people who did not like his message.

If we decide to become serious about our relationship with Christ, if we undertake efforts to share the gospel with people around us, if we commit time and energy to the church, we can expect that we will encounter certain difficulties. Paul in 2 Timothy #3 promised that we would encounter persecution. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The **second** factor in Paul's suffering for fellow Christians involved his fighting for legal protection for fellow Christians. The Roman government required people in their empire to worship the Roman gods. But they generally tolerated the Jews and their insistence

upon worship of only the one true God. Paul argued that his preaching of the Christian gospel was fully in accord with true Jewish doctrine.

The religious leadership in Jerusalem, for the most part, rejected that claim. Part of what Paul was doing in going to Rome as a prisoner was seeking a ruling by the highest court in the empire that Christianity was kosher and part of ancient Jewish tradition. It appears that initially the high court ruled in his favor, and Christians for a while had freedom to worship. Paul's suffering in this regard benefited the entire church.

When Christians get involved in court battles over the right to put up Christmas displays, to pray in high school graduations, to rent public facilities, to have Bible clubs in public high schools, and to share their faith in the workplace, we need to appreciate them. We need to pray for them when we hear about such court challenges. Maybe some of us would be prompted to give to the Christian legal organizations that take on cases like this. For there is financial suffering and stress and difficulty that comes with the efforts of these people to protect our legal rights. All of us as Christians benefit from such efforts.

The **third** way in which Paul's suffering benefited the church was that it gave him a sensitivity for the suffering of others. In 2 Corinthians #1 vv. 3-6 (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3) he writes, "**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, (2 CORINTHIANS 1:4) who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 CORINTHIANS 1:5) For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. (2 CORINTHIANS 1:6) If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer....**"

John Newton was an English sailor who had a wild life as a younger man. For a time he was the captain of a slave ship, but he was dramatically converted to Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF) Later he became a pastor in England. He is best known to us, though, as the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." He once said, "**God appoints his ministers to be sorely exercised, both from without and within; that they may sympathize with their flock, and know in their own hearts the deceitfulness of sin, the infirmities of the flesh, and the way in which the Lord supports and bears all who trust in Him.**" So it is that I have had the experiences of joblessness, financial stress, being fired, having cancer, and having various health challenges in my family. So it may be for you.

**Fourth**, Paul specifically says in our verse that he suffers in order to fill up "**what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.**" What does he mean by that? Roman Catholics often say that the death of Christ on the cross was not really completely sufficient to provide for our salvation. Therefore, our acts of self-denial and our deeds of kindness serve to

ensure our future deliverance. Purgatory also helps to complete this process, so they say.

There are problems, however, with this idea. Purgatory is not mentioned in the Bible. Also the word that Paul uses for “afflictions” is fairly common in the New Testament. It is never used to describe the crucifixion of Christ. Then, too, this notion runs contrary to the teaching of the rest of the New Testament about the sufficiency of the death of Christ on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. Last week we saw back in vv. 20 and 22 that Paul said that the death of Christ was sufficient to reconcile man, and indeed all of the created universe, to God.

So it seems more likely that Paul here has in mind Christ’s teachings about the sufferings that must happen before He returns to earth. Paul seems to regard these sufferings as a predetermined amount. In experiencing suffering Himself Paul is filling up some of the total amount of suffering that will be necessary to happen upon the earth before Christ’s return.

Serving Christ involves a certain cost. It does involve suffering. Some of our suffering is the result of our human condition. But Paul specifically said that the godly will experience a certain amount of persecution. Paul’s experience and the experience of other committed Christians in the Bible and in Christian history and in the present suggest that we will also have other kinds of problems. We may have health problems or financial problems or people problems or family problems. None of this sounds like fun. What are we to think about it?

II.

In vv. 24 and 25 Paul talks about THE NEEDED ATTITUDE IN SERVING CHRIST. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE NEEDED ATTITUDE...) At the beginning of v. 24 he speaks of rejoicing in his suffering. How could he do that? He doesn’t fully explain it here, but it is implied that the benefit that comes to the Colossians in particular and the church in general gives him encouragement. There is joy that comes to Paul from knowing that his suffering produces benefits for the kingdom of God.

While working for the *Chicago Tribune* atheist journalist Lee Strobel was assigned to a report on the struggles of an impoverished family dealing with loss before Christmas. A sixty year old grandmother and her two granddaughters had been burned out of their tenement and were living in a tiny apartment. There was no furniture and nothing on the walls. There was only a kitchen table and a handful of rice. But the grandmother, also dealing with severe arthritis, was confident that God was with them.

Strobel wrote the article. Their faith haunted him. He later said, **“I continued to wrestle with the irony of the situation. Here was a family that had nothing but faith, and yet seemed happy, while I had everything I needed materially, but lacked faith--- and inside I felt as empty and barren as their apartment.”**

Strobel visited the family shortly before Christmas and discovered that readers of the paper had sent lots of stuff. He also found that the family was giving much of it away to their neighbors. That generosity was giving them joy. Strobel said, **“That blew me away! If I had been in their position at that time in my life, I would have been hoarding everything. .... To her [the grandmother whose name was Perfecta], this child in the manger was the undeserved gift that meant everything--- more than material possessions, more than comfort, more than security. And at that moment, something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus---- because, in a sense, I saw him in Perfecta and her granddaughters. They had peace despite poverty, while I had anxiety despite plenty; they knew the joy of generosity, while I only knew the loneliness of ambition; they looked heavenward for hope, while I only looked out for myself; they experienced the wonder of the spiritual, while I was shackled to the shallowness of the material--- and something made me long for what they had.”** (*The Case for Christmas*, 2005) This poor family endured suffering and yet experienced joy in their service of generosity.

In v. 25 Paul also speaks of his role as involving a special responsibility from God. He writes, **“...of which [church] 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...”** When we hear the word “minister,” we may think of a religious professional. The original word is diakonos, from which we get our word “deacon.” Its basic meaning is “servant.”

But Paul implies that this is a special servant. For he goes on to speak about a stewardship. A steward was the chief servant in a wealthy person’s home. He was usually responsible for the administration of the practical affairs of the household. Joseph was such a steward when he was in the household of the captain of the bodyguard in Egypt.

Here Paul’s stewardship involves a responsibility to preach the gospel. He has been particularly entrusted by God to serve as the apostle to the Gentiles. God chose Paul to take a lead in bringing the good news about Jesus to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. He is supposed to fully carry out this job. Paul regards this as a great task. It is a task that is worth the cost of suffering. For Paul is working for the Creator of the universe. He is on a mission for God. Some day he can look forward to an eternal reward.

In Philippians #3 (PHILIPPIANS 3:8) he said, **“...I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ (PHILIPPIANS 3:9) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— (PHILIPPIANS 3:10-11) that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead...”**

That is the kind of joyful attitude that God wants all of us Christians to have. We don't have the same kind of responsibility that Paul had. But we are responsible to share the gospel in our realm of influence. We are responsible to be good parents, obedient children, hard workers, good students, generous neighbors, and faithful Christians. We need to see our individual role in life as a mission from God, and we need to trust God for the ability to have joy in it.

III.

In vv. 26 & 27 Paul describes THE MESSAGE USED IN SERVING CHRIST. (III. THE MESSAGE USED...) In v. 26 he writes of **“the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints...”** The original word for “mystery” was used very much like our own English word. It was also used of secret religious or philosophical knowledge. Historians refer to some of the religions of Asia Minor from this time in history as “mystery religions.” They had secret religious rituals that were supposed to lead worshippers into spiritual truth. Other Greek religious and philosophical teachers used the word to describe inside information that only the spiritual elite possessed.

The false teachers at Colossae seem to have been under this religious influence. So Paul uses a term that was familiar to them. But instead of saying that this mystery stuff was available only to an elite few, he says that it has been manifested to all of God's saints. It is not hidden any more. It is open to every Christian.

In the New Testament Paul uses the word “mystery” to refer to something that was previously unknown to God's people but has now been revealed by God. The content is explained in v. 27. He says, **“To them [the saints, Christians] 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.”**

Note first that Paul says that this “mystery” involves glory. It is something great and wonderful. Furthermore, it involves riches. This mystery is of tremendous value. And God has made it known to Christians.

There are two things involved in this mystery. First, it involves Gentiles. The Old Testament did speak about God's desire to include Gentiles in His plan of salvation. Psalm 67 (PSALM 67:1-2) says, in the first two verses, **“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.”**

Furthermore God revealed that the coming Messiah would be involved in bringing this salvation to the Gentiles. In Isaiah #49 v. 6 (ISAIAH 49:6) we read, **“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”**

The new, previously unrevealed truth is that Gentiles would be united with Jews and be on the same par with them before God. In Ephesians #2 vv. 13-16 (EPHESIANS 2:13-14) Paul explains, **“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility (EPHESIANS 2:15-16) by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.** The idea that Gentiles could be fellow citizens with Jews, without converting to Judaism, was new and different. It was a mystery now revealed.

The second part of the mystery is “Christ in you.” (PROJECTOR OFF) This was something totally new. Old Testament saints knew that God was omnipresent, present everywhere. They knew that at times the Holy Spirit came to possess people. They knew that the Messiah was coming. But they had no clear understanding that this Messiah would be both God and man, and they had no inkling that he would somehow come to live within His individual followers.

In the Upper Room on the night before His crucifixion Jesus initiated the Last Supper. (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 14:18-20). He told His disciples in John #14 vv. 18-20, **“I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”** When we come to trust in Jesus as our Savior, Jesus Christ in some way comes to live within us. The Creator of the universe resides in us! That is the second part of the mystery.

What people believe determines how they live. We have a belief system that has been revealed to us by the God who is there. That belief system should transform the way that we live. It should motivate us to serve Christ. It should motivate us to endure suffering, to even do it with joy.

IV.

In v. 28 Paul then describes THE GOAL IN SERVING CHRIST. (IV. THE GOAL IN SERVING CHRIST) He says, **“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”** The goal is to present people mature, or complete, in Christ. We do that by proclaiming God’s Word. But our focus is not so much upon a set of beliefs or rules or religious rituals. It is primarily upon a person. We proclaim Him. We proclaim Christ.

This proclamation involves warning and teaching. The original word for “warning” means “to set the mind of someone in proper order.” It involves helping people understand what stakes are involved in decisions to trust in Jesus. Teaching involves instruction in the Christian faith.

The presentation in view seems to involve the return of Christ. Paul is talking about maturity. The goal of all Christian instruction should be to develop mature Christians.

When Christ returns, He will have mature Christians to receive. Back in v. 22 Paul spoke of his desire to present the Colossian Christians to Christ **“holy and blameless and above reproach.”** This is the goal for every Christian, not just the elite few like the heretics at Colossae seemed to promote.

The job involved is similar to that of parenting. As parents we want to turn out mature kids. We want to see young people come out of our homes who can handle suffering, who can make wise decisions, who can live godly lives. That is what we should want for one another in the body of Christ. We need to encourage one another to walk with God, to grow in our faith, to persevere in the face of suffering.

V.

Finally in v. 29 we learn about THE POWER IN SERVING CHRIST. (V. THE POWER IN SERVING CHRIST) Paul writes, **“For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”** Paul’s responsibility was to work at the job that he had been given by Christ. His job involved labor and striving. Faithful servants of God, whether full time Christian workers or Christian lay people, should work hard at serving Christ.

But at the same time they recognize that it is God who is at work in them. Paul also wrote (2 CORINTHIANS 4:7) in 2 Corinthians #4 v. 7, **“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”** We are to work hard at serving Christ. We all need times of rest. But to be faithful stewards of the responsibilities that God has given us, there is no room for laziness. At the same time we must recognize that the power to do things of eternal value ultimately comes from Him. (PROJECTOR OFF)

What does it mean to serve Christ? It means working hard at promoting the gospel about faith in Jesus so that people will come to maturity in Christ. It means persevering in the face of suffering realizing that we have the privilege of serving an awesome God.

Dianne Haskett became convinced that God wanted her to go into politics. She sensed that it was the way of living out her Christian life to which God had called her. So she ran for mayor of London, Ontario, and won. In 1995 she instituted a policy banning proclamations related to abortion, homosexuality, heterosexuality or celibacy. This was after she got word that the Homophile Association of London would seek a proclamation promoting a gay pride weekend in that town.

When Mayor Haskett refused to do that, she was called before the Ontario Human Rights Commission. She told the board that to endorse abortion or homosexuality would be **“turning my back on God and I can’t do that. The day I turn my back on God is the day I lose my authority as the mayor of London.”**

The board was unimpressed. They ordered the mayor to make the proclamation and fined the city and the mayor \$10,000. The city council voted not to appeal the board’s



decision. But Mayor Haskett refused to implement the order. Instead she took a three-week leave of absence to allow the proclamation to be made without her endorsement.

Much of this controversy took place in the midst of the mayor's run for re-election. The newspapers were withering in their criticism. They characterized Haskett as intolerant, bigoted, and a disgrace to the city. *The London Free Press* called her decision to step down "bizarre."

A rally of her supporters took place at city hall. One businessman who spoke said, **"Diane has earned our respect for the kind of person we know her to be. Integrity of her kind is all too rare in people in political life."** He went on to say that she had kept her political promises.

The mayor's opponent came out in favor of the gay pride weekend. But when the election results were tabulated, the Christian mayor won by a better than two-to-one margin. Mayor Haskett credited God for her victory. She added that it was **"a gift from the people of London."** A publication called *Christian Week* said that she won strong support **"not only from the evangelical Christian community, but from other faith groups and the broader community for her principled stands on a variety of moral and social issues and her efforts to promote reconciliation among different parts of the community."** After completing her second term, she moved to Washington, DC, where she has been involved in various legal, political, and charitable activities.

Serving Christ always means promoting faith in Jesus Christ among the people with whom we come in contact. For a few of us living the Christian life means being a pastor. For more of us it means being a good mom or dad. It means being a good student, a good worker, a good neighbor, a faithful caregiver, a Sunday school teacher, a deaconess, or an elder.

In serving Christ there will be a cost. But it will pale in comparison to the significance of the work which we are about. We need to persevere in doing what God has called us to do. It is worth it to give our lives in service to Christ.