



**SESSION OBJECTIVE: COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5**

To understand why Christian suffering is happening, and how difficult discipleship is.

## You Complete Me

In 1996, Tom Cruise, Cuba Gooding Jr., and Renee Zellweger starred in Jerry Maguire. The movie was a success, pulling in several nominations for the Academy Awards and even winning one (Cuba Gooding Jr., for Best Support Actor). It was also filled with now iconic lines such as, “Show me the money,” “Help me help you,” and, “You had me at hello.” Perhaps the most iconic line was delivered by Tom Cruise as he professes his love for Zellweger. After telling her he loves her he says, “you complete me.”

While it makes for a good movie, the idea of any person being completed by another person is far-fetched. God creates us to be completed, not by the person we love or marry, but by Him. Paul, in Colossians 1:28, writes: “We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man *complete in Christ*.” It is only in Christ that we are made complete, and so the aim of the Christian faith is to be built up in His wisdom, teaching, and direction. The question is, “What does that look like, practically speaking?” We will discuss that this week.

## Suffering for His Sake

Verse 24 reads, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” This is, without question, one of

the most difficult passages in the New Testament to understand. What does Paul mean that he is, “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions?” Is he insinuating that Christ’s suffering was somehow not enough?

In order to grasp this verse, we need to break down some things first. For starters, what does Paul mean by suffering in general? What kind of suffering are we speaking of? The word here for, “sufferings,” is the Greek word πάθημα (pathēma), and it means, “a misfortune that is endured.” It’s safe to say that the idea conveyed here is similar to how we use the word in a modern sense. There are many ways suffering is discussed in the New Testament. Suffering can be the result of the fallen world. It can be the result of oppressive people. It can be the result of our own bad choices. It can also be the result of following Jesus. What, then, is Paul referring to here?

The key word here is, “share.” Paul shares a type of suffering that Jesus also suffered. John 1:11 says, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.” Jesus was predestined to suffer and be rejected, in fact. Isaiah 53:3-4 says, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” It was the plan of the Father for the Son to suffer. And His suffering for our sin and atonement are complete, lacking in nothing. Later, in Colossians 2:14-15, Paul writes that Jesus, “canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him.” Hebrews 1:3 says, “After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” Jesus’ suffering and death are the atoning work that provide forgiveness from sin (9:18-22), a propitiation (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 Jn. 2:2), and new life (Gal. 2:20).

So that brings us back to the initial question: “Why does Paul say that he is filling up what is LACKING in Christ’s sufferings?” It is not the suffering for atonement that Paul is speaking of, but the suffering inaugurated by the Messiah’s coming. Jewish writings indicate a sort of, “last days,” that the people of God will suffer through which they called the, “Messianic Woes.” This is perhaps what Jesus had in mind in Matthew 24:4-14. Perhaps Paul’s belief is that Christ’s coming has now ushered in these so-called, “last days,” and his own suffering (and other Christian suffering) was a result of this. This was the plan of God all along, as is outlined at least in Revelation 6:9-11: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”

Christian suffering, and by that I mean suffering for the sake of the Christian faith, is something that God sovereignly willed and that will one day be avenged in the final judgment. Believers who suffer for the sake of Jesus, as Paul and those mentioned in Revelation 6 did, will be rewarded. Imagine a giant cup that is being filled with water (or blood, to be a bit more exact). Imagine that Christ’s suffering fills that cup up some, but not fully, and that Christ will not return again to bring final judgment until the cup is full. Every time we suffer as believers, that cup is being filled. We are, “filling up what is lacking.” When that filling is completed, the final things will come to pass and evil will be vanquished once and for all (Rev. 20:11-15).

This passage is important because it gives not only context but *purpose* to Christian suffering. We don't experience this so much in the West as other believers in other parts of the world do, but understand that God is not blindly allowing His people to suffer evil. On the contrary, it is very *purposeful*, and will one day come to and end for good.

## Serving for His Sake

Paul then goes on to say that His apostleship was placed on Him, "according to the stewardship of God for your benefit." Below is a breakdown of some key terms.

### *"The preaching of the Word of God"*

The primary means of ministering to the body for the sake of making them complete in Christ is the preaching of the Word of God. Paul surely believes and even teaches the value in serving, exhorting, encouraging, worshipping, praying, fasting, and a myriad of other things. Yet, the building up of the body happens primarily through the preaching of the Word of God. Proclaiming the Scriptures is important. Something happens when the Word of God is opened and expounded upon. The Holy Spirit makes applications in the hearts and minds of His people and brings conviction where necessary, and this in turn shapes us in the body to look and think more like Jesus. Do not forsake the hearing of the proclaimed Word. It's important to your spiritual maturity.

### *"The mystery which has been hidden from the past ages"*

What is this mystery that Paul speaks of? The term "mystery" (Gk. μυστήριον, "mystērion") is a word in Paul's writings that doesn't mean the same as it does in our modern understanding. A mystery to Paul was a truth that laid hidden in the pages of the Old Testament for generations and was now understood because of divine revelation. In other words, the Old Testament was jam-packed with passages regarding the coming Messiah, what He would be like, where He would be born, how He would be born, and what He would accomplish, and yet when He came, no one understood it was Him. Now, because of this divine revelation in Jesus Christ, we understand the mystery of God because we have seen it brought to light. It is the full knowledge of this mystery that knits us together in love, and brings, "full assurance of understanding" (Col. 2:2).

### *"Christ in you, the hope of glory"*

The mystery of which Paul speaks is revealed here; His presence within you will be your hope of future glory. Truthfully, the recipients of this unveiling of God's mystery are the people of God, the same mystery that is now at work among the Gentiles. Verse 27 says that God has, "willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles."

The point of this passage is that of completion. We are made complete in Christ. The teaching and life of Christ orients us to a better way. The presence of Christ in our midst as a worship community sparks hope deep within us. While it is the case that Paul elsewhere argues that Christ takes up residence in the individual believers (2 Cor. 13:5; Rom. 8:10; Eph. 3:17), that is not probably what he is arguing for here. The pronoun "you" is plural in the Greek. Literally translated it would read, "Christ in you all, the hope of glory." The point is that apart from Jesus we are nothing and we have nothing, but in Him, we not only made complete, but we are spurred onto glorious hope as His presence falls on His people.

## Striving for Your Sake

Lastly, Paul says, “For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” The word here for labor in the Greek is κοπιάω (kopiaō), and it means, “to be wearied or spent with labor.” He employs the verb “striving” which in the Greek is ἀγωνίζομαι (agōnizomai), the word from which we get our English word, “agony.” It’s actually a word that was used for a fighting contest. He struggles, he fights, for the purpose of making known this mystery, and he does so not from his own strength, but the strength of Jesus that works within him.

The apostle is making a practical point that I think is important for us to hear. Discipleship, mentoring, and preaching for the sake of making others complete in Christ is difficult. It’s easy to believe the lie that the Christian walk should be this fun and easy event, and it’s simply not. It entails struggle, spiritual warfare, humility, and forgiveness. This is perhaps why Hebrews says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17). Ministry is hard. Paul says in chapter 2, verse 1, “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all of those who have not personally seen my face.” Ministers often grow weary in the pursuit to build up other believers, even when we don’t know them personally. It’s a labor. It’s wearisome. It’s a fight and a struggle. Don’t make it harder than it already is. Alas, as difficult as it is, it’s so worth it.

## Study Questions

### Day One

1. Read Colossians 1:24. What does Paul rejoice in? For whose sake? What kind of suffering is Paul talking about? What does it mean that Paul is, “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions?” (Hint: See notes above)

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2. Read Colossians 1:25. According to what was Paul made a minister? For whose benefit was he made a minister?

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### Day Two

1. Read Colossians 1:26. What does mystery mean in Paul’s writings? (Hint: See above notes) To whom was this mystery manifested?

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2. Read Colossians 1:27. To whom has God revealed, “the riches of the glory of this mystery?” Among whom is this mystery playing out? What does, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” mean? Is it an individual presence or a corporate (church) presence? Why or why not? (Hint: See above notes)

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### Day Three

1. Read Colossians 1:28. What is it that Paul and the other ministers are doing? For what purpose are they doing these things?

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2. Read Colossians 1:29. According to the purpose stated above, what else is Paul doing? What does it mean that he is, “striving?” Is ministry easy or difficult according to this passage?

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### Day Four

1. Read Colossians 2:1-3. Who has struggled for? For what purpose? Make a list of the benefits of attaining a, “true knowledge of God’s mystery.” What is hidden in Christ?

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2. Read Colossians 2:4-5. What is the purpose of Paul saying these things? What does it mean to be, “absent in the body, but with you in spirit.” What was Paul rejoicing over?

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## Week 5 Discussion: Rethinking His Image

In Colossians 1:24-2:5, Paul unpacks the labors he has undergone to help admonish and teach every man, “that we may present every man complete in Christ.” Talk as a group about the efforts this church undergoes to do this in your life, and how well you have taken advantage of these things. Decide what areas you are doing well, and where you might need to be more involved.

1. Icebreaker: What things do you see the pastors at your church doing to help equip you and present you as complete in Christ?
2. Do you think ministry is mostly easy or fairly difficult? Why?
3. Have you ever disciplined someone in the Christian faith? What were the most difficult challenges you faced? What did you struggle with the most?
4. What things are the pastors of your church doing that you are not taking advantage of? Why?
5. How can you be a blessing to your pastors in your church? What easy and practical things can you do to encourage them to keep going despite the difficulty of ministry? How can you show appreciation for the efforts that are made to spiritually develop you?

## Takeaways:

1. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ inaugurated a period of suffering called, “the last days.”
2. The only person who can truly bring completion to our life is Jesus.
3. The primary means of discipleship is through the proclaimed Word of God.