

PREFACE: TRACKING PAUL'S THOUGHTS

It is fascinating to track Paul's train of thought as he writes to the brothers and sisters in Colossae. When we observe this, it humanizes both the text and the one doing the writing. No longer is it just cold doctrine itemized on a page, but it is a real human being—a teacher, a shepherd—working through his thoughts, letting the Spirit move him from one topic to the next.

Paul begins his letter, as always, with a greeting, which flows effortlessly into an appreciation of their love for the brethren and the fruit they have been bearing since they heard the word of truth from Epaphras, their pastor (1:6b-7).

He begins v9 with “For this reason also...” followed by mention of how regularly and steadily he has been praying for them—for their continuing knowledge of God’s will, spiritual wisdom and understanding; continued fruit bearing; and that they would be strengthened from above. He closes this at v12 with “giving thanks to the Father,” which leads him into a new topic.

Verses 12-14 are a transitional passage:

- “giving thanks to the Father” prompts him to elaborate on what the Father has done for them:
 - He *qualified* us to share in the inheritance of the saints;
 - He *rescued* us from the domain of darkness;
 - He *transferred* us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.

Then, as we might expect as we watch the wheels turn in Paul’s mind, mention of the “beloved Son” sends him on an extended riff (vs14-23) on who Christ is, what He has accomplished in creation, His standing, His Lordship, His fullness. At v21 he personalizes this work of Christ to the people reading this letter, contrasting their previous condition (“alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds”) to their present condition in v22 (“reconciled,” “holy and blameless and beyond reproach”).

In v23 Paul speaks of the continuance of their “hope in the gospel” and closes the passage with “of which I, Paul, was made a minister.” So what is he going to write about next? His ministry, of course.

Read Colossians 1:24-27.**v24**

So we are now at v24, and from here through v2:5 Paul inserts a personal interlude about his ministry, his “stewardship of the divine mystery” (Bruce). And once again we are confronted with a controversial, disputed verse—one that has been the basis for volumes of scholarly interpretation.

Read Colossians 1:24.

I am sure some of you wonder why I so often bother mentioning the underlying Greek words of our text. After all, accomplished biblical scholars have translated it into English for us, which should be perfectly adequate, right? Well, this verse is an excellent example of what we gain—and how controversy can be easily resolved—by examining the original text.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...

But let's take it in order. Paul makes one of those statements so foreign to the culture of this fallen world. Why in the world would Paul be cheerful, happy about his sufferings? Was he a masochist? No, he just lived what he wrote. He did not just believe, he knew from experience that one could actually *benefit* from suffering.

Read Romans 5:1-5.

Paul knew that suffering—"tribulation"—is part of the maturing process of faith. Not just this, but suffering *for* brothers and sisters in the faith carries extra benefit: the joy that comes from any service unselfishly performed for others, painful or not.

Verse 3 in Romans 5 gives us a clue to resolving the controversy of v24 in Colossians. Note the word "tribulations" ("sufferings" in NIV and ESV); this is the same word translated "afflictions" ("in Christ's afflictions") in v24.

...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. (Colossians 1:24b)

Ah, there it is.

First, there is an immediate, contextual reason this rings untrue in our ears. Where have we just come from? Paul has spent several paragraphs detailing the *sufficiency* of Christ Jesus.

- firstborn of all creation
- creator
- image of the invisible God
- the fullness of God
- before all things, and in Him all things hold together
- the head of the church
- first place in everything

Now after all that, Paul says there is something *lacking* in Christ?

Second, from what we know that Paul has written elsewhere this rings untrue. When we read the words "Christ's afflictions" our tendency is to immediately think of the cross, and our mind rebels against even the suggestion that Paul could add anything to that. Indeed, Paul agrees. And we don't have to go far.

Read Colossians 1:19-20.

But this is precisely how many Catholics have interpreted this verse—that this verse refers to Christ's *redemptive* sufferings, thus using it "as grounds for asserting that Christ's atonement is defective and that the sufferings of the saints are needed to supplement His work on our behalf" (Vaughan).

But to answer both of these misinterpretations we need only look at the Greek word translated "afflictions" or "sufferings" in v24.

thlipsis = from <G2346> (thlibo); **pressure** (literal or figurative) :- afflicted (-tion), anguish, **burdened**, persecution, tribulation, **trouble**.

That word is never used in the NT of Christ's redemptive suffering on the cross. But it *is* used to describe His and His followers' *ministerial* suffering—the suffering they experience because of their allegiance to Christ.

Read John 16:33.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-4.

Curtis Vaughan: The suffering [Christ's] people endure are a continuation of what He endured, and in that sense they complete His afflictions. "It is a simple matter of fact," writes Lightfoot, "that the afflictions of every saint and martyr do supplement the afflictions of Christ. The church is built up by repeated acts of self-denial in successive individuals and successive generations. They continue the work which Christ began."

The underlying principle is the believer's union with Christ. That union is so intimate—Christ the Head, His people the body—that He suffers when they suffer (cf. Isaiah 63:9). His personal sufferings are over, but His sufferings in His people continue (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10).

"What is still lacking" is not an intimation of deficiency in Christ's own sufferings, but a reference to what is yet lacking in Christ's suffering *in Paul*.

Pastor Daniel: In reference to fulfilling what is lacking in Christ's affliction, I've appreciated John Piper's explanation: because Christ is no longer on earth, Paul receives the affliction which Christ would have received were He still here. That's easy to bring into our own lives.

This idea is captured in the J. B. Phillips paraphrase of v24.

Read Colossians 1:24 in Phillips.

What this is, really, is a picture of the exquisite, intimate unity of both Christ with His body, the church, and the unity every believer shares with every other believer. When one of His children suffer, He suffers; when a fellow believer suffers, the body as a whole suffers; when a fellow believer encourages and prays for another, the body heals.

v25

Once again we see Paul's train of thought from v24 to v25. Verse 24 is about Paul's ministry to the church, so it naturally follows that v25 begins, "Of this church..."

Read v25.

Although it does not include the words "suffering" or "tribulation," that reality permeates the verse. We know this because of the account of the moment in his life when he *was* "made a minister." Shortly after that dramatic call on the Damascus Road, Paul retires to that city blind and, apparently, without appetite, for he neither ate nor drank for three days. Then the Lord sends Ananias to give Paul (Saul) his marching orders, including what He says to Ananias in vs15-16 of Chapter 9.

Read Acts 9:15-16.

From the beginning Paul understood that his conversion and the work to follow would entail suffering. Over time he came to understand the *fullness* of this suffering—that it was, in some mystical way, a continuation of the suffering of the Lord. [[back to Colossians](#)]

Sidebar: While there is nothing wrong with the different translations that say Paul “became” or “have become” a minister, I favor the NASB and KJV that translate the word *ginomai* as “made.” One can “become” something without any external influence, but this was not the case of Paul’s calling. We know from the account in Acts 9 that Christ Jesus personally *made* Paul a minister of His gospel.

Verse 25 deals with another “fullness”—and again we must decide which translation best expresses the original thought.

NASB: so that I might fully carry out the **preaching** of the word of God,
not shirk my duties as a preacher?
be a thorough expositor?
preach every word, whether it hurts or not?

KJVs: to fulfill the word of God,
to fully fill the word of God?
to play my part in fulfilling its prophecies and intent?

NIV: to present to you the word of God in its fullness
to present to you the full depth and meaning of God’s word?
to not skim over the surface, but dig deep into God’s word?

ESV: to make the word of God fully known,
to share the entirety of God’s word?
to faithfully spread the word of God far and wide?

God took the Jewish zealot, persecutor of Christians, and remade him into a minister, rightly proclaiming and teaching the true, full nature of the Gospel as a faithful steward of the church. And that is the call to us, as well: *Tell them the truth! The whole truth, and nothing but the truth!*

Let me close with this clarification: Paul concludes v25 with (in the NIV) “...to present to you the word of God in its fullness,” and then expands on this in vs26-27—where we will continue next week.

We should remember that when Paul says that he had been called to present “the word of God in its fullness,” he is saying something different from, for example, Pastor Jeremy saying the same thing. If our pastor said this, he would be referring to the printed, leather-bound book he holds in his hand. He would be saying that to fulfill his calling he must faithfully and accurately explain the *Bible* to the flock.

When Paul says it, he refers to the word God had given him to explain the good news about Jesus the Christ. It was not written down; it was, in fact, *in the process of being written down*, in the biographies of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and in the letters of Paul, Peter, Jude, James, John, and the writer to the Hebrews.

Paul was a preacher and *apostle*—*gifted* by the Spirit with healing and prophetic abilities; our pastors are preachers and *expositors* of the written word. To Paul, the “word of God” was the life of Christ, explained to him by the indwelling Spirit; to Pastor Jeremy, the “word of God” is the printed book he reads and studies.