

COLOSSIANS

Filling Up What Is Lacking
5.22.2022



THE JOURNEY
CHURCH

SCRIPTURE:

Colossians 1:24-29

RECAP:

We recite the 5 Solas here each week. One of those is Sola Scriptura, Scripture Alone. It is the Word of God that serves as the true and final authority for the church. We want to know what God says, not what man's opinion is. As we think about a doctrine of Scripture, there are several facets that come up.

The Authority of Scripture. This teaches that the governing authority over our lives and faith is the Word of God. It's not our feelings, the culture, or any other person. God's Word is what we submit to.

The Sufficiency of Scripture. We don't need the Bible plus anything else to have all we need for life and godliness. This doesn't mean we don't engage in science, politics, or anything else. It means we don't have the Bible plus those things to know what God requires of us.

The Necessity of Scripture. We need Scripture in order to be reconciled to God. Every human being has general revelation about God through what has been made. But everyone needs special revelation to know the gospel. We need the Word of God to know the most important things.

The Clarity of Scripture. The clarity of Scripture means that it doesn't require a PhD or theology degree in order to read and understand the Bible. We believe the plain of reading of Scripture provides clarity about the revelation of God and how to be reconciled to Him. This is what we mean by the clarity of Scripture. We don't need a Pope, Cardinal, or Bishop to tell us what it means. We can read it and see for ourselves.

This doesn't mean we don't need teachers and that God hasn't gifted teachers for the purpose of helping His people understand the Word. It just means the Scripture's are not a secret decoder text that requires a person of special anointing and position to tell us.

And it also doesn't mean that everything we read in Scripture is easy to grasp. In fact, it's not. There are places that are far easier to read and understand than other places. There are places in Scripture where the text is plain, but what is meant by it is not. There are difficult things in the Bible. It is not a simple book.

We run into a passage today that presents us with this challenge. We run into a text that challenges us on how to interpret the Scripture properly, and we do so with humility because we know we could be wrong.

Passage Exegesis: Colossians 1:24-29

"24 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,"

Right out of the gate we have some serious interpretive work we have to do on this verse. Paul states that he rejoices in his sufferings for their sake. What suffering is he speaking of? Well, he is in prison for preaching the gospel. He's experienced hardships and persecutions for preaching the gospel. He's been run out of towns and attacked physically in order to get the gospel out and churches planted. He rejoices in his sufferings. Is this some sort of sick love for pain and hardship? No. It is a knowledge that he is walking faithfully in the will of the Lord for him.

Do you remember what Jesus told Paul during his conversion? It is recorded in Acts 9. Paul is converted when he encounters Jesus. The glory of the Lord blinds him and he is told to go into the city to find a man named Ananias. Then the Lord tells Ananias that Paul is coming to him. Watch what it says:

Acts 9:13-16 -- *13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."*

Paul is saved by Jesus to be a chosen instrument to preach to the Gentiles. But Paul's life is going to be marked by suffering for Christ's name. This is how Paul is able to rejoice in his sufferings, because he knows he is walking in step with Jesus' mission for him.

Then he makes a statement that is hard to interpret. He says **"in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."** Let me start by saying some passages of Scripture are easier to interpret than others. "Jesus wept" is easier to understand than this one. However, when interpreting the Bible, we use the whole Bible to help us. We let Scripture interpret Scripture. So one thing we know from the beginning is that Paul is not saying that there is something insufficient about Christ's death on the cross. Right? He's not suggesting that Jesus' death was insufficient and therefore is doing something to complete what Jesus lacked. So what does he mean? Many Bible-loving people land on different conclusions. Let me outline a few positions.

1. John Piper -- Piper believes that the suffering Paul endures and undergoes for the sake of the church is making the sacrifice of Christ visible to the believers. These Christians were not present during the physical sufferings of Christ on their behalf. So as Paul suffers for their sake, to bring the gospel to them and to toil for their salvation, they are seeing a picture of Christ to them through Paul. In that way, Paul is filling up the sufferings of Christ for his people for the sake of his body, the church. Piper isn't suggesting that Paul is winning atoning for sin or purchasing their salvation, rather he is suggesting that Paul is a picture of how Christ won it through his sufferings. And as a result of Paul modeling it, helping to fulfill Christ's sufferings for his people. It is a reasonable interpretation, but I don't think it is the best explanation.

2. John Calvin -- Calvin believed that this passage taught that while Christ the head suffered once and for all for his body, the body of Christ suffers in this world, and in a sense, Christ is suffering with them. There is a mystical union between Christ and His people as they suffer. And in this way, as the body suffers, so Christ suffers through them. They are filling up what is lacking in his sufferings. Meaning, there are certain amounts of sufferings that must be endured before Christ returns, and Jesus suffered some of it on earth, but now his bride suffers in the world, filling up the rest.

Again, it is a reasonable interpretation, and in some sense I do believe we share in special communion with Christ in our sufferings, but I don't think it is the best explanation of what Paul is driving at in this text.

3. John MacArthur -- MacArthur's position is that the church suffers for Christ in the world, and as a result, fills up what he would have personally suffered had he remained in the world. This view takes Paul's words to imply that it is the church's role to continue

to suffer what Christ would have suffered. And in that sense, we are filling up what was lacking in his sufferings by not being here.

Again, reasonable, but not most probable.

We love those three Johns. We think they are all faithful Bible expositors, yet each lands in a different place on the meaning of this text. And I land on a different place than all three of them. But it is vital to see where these three guys would agree on far more than they ever disagreed about, there are difficult texts in Scripture that we can land in different places than other believers. Here's where I land on Paul's meaning:

4. The Great Commission focused view -- This view holds that what Paul means by in his flesh filling up what is lacking in Christ's suffering is his work to preach the gospel and make converts is filling up what Christ's atonement secured. The key to this is looking again at Paul's words earlier in the verse, **"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."** He rejoices in his sufferings for their sake (the church). His sufferings are his labors to spread the gospel throughout the world. He does it for the sake of Christ's body, the church. Paul then says in his flesh, he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Think about this: Christ's affliction was his death on the cross to redeem and reconcile his bride. That death on the cross achieved salvation. He made a purchase. He gave a ransom. He laid his life down for the sheep (John 10). Is there anything lacking in what he did? No. Then what does Paul mean "to fill up what was lacking?" He means to go out and secure what Jesus' afflictions purchased, namely: a blood bought bride.

- Jesus died on the cross, and was afflicted for our sins.
- Paul goes out and preaches to the world, to the Gentiles.
- They respond by faith, and as a result, fill up what Jesus died to secure.

What does Paul mean by "in his flesh." He doesn't mean that he is atoning for sin. He means he is laboring to spread the gospel, even through strife and afflictions, through his life. I believe this is the most clear meaning of the passage, especially in light of the context.

25 of which 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, 26 the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 27 To them 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.

Paul became a minister of the gospel for the church because God called him to this task. Because he is called to this task he has a stewardship to manage it well. His stewardship in particular was to the Gentiles, and to help them know the Lord.

He speaks about making the word of God fully known to them. What he is revealing is the task of sharing the revelation God has made of Himself to the world He made. Then Paul says this word of God is "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints." What is the mystery hidden for ages? It is that the redemptive plan of God was always for the world, including the Gentiles. The covenant with Abraham (and the Jews) was always aimed at being a covenant that blessed every nation, tribe, and tongue. How is that? Because the offspring of Abraham, Jesus Christ, would be the light to the Gentiles promised throughout the Old Testament. The Old Testament pointed to this throughout. God revealed it, but it was a mystery for ages. People didn't grasp it. Paul's task and stewardship was revealing what God made known that had previously been a mystery.

This mystery is: Christ in you, the hope of glory. The Gentiles are fellow heirs to the covenant promises through Christ. In Christ, we have the hope of glory, eternal life forever with God.

28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. 29 For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Paul says it is Christ, Him, we proclaim. He warns everyone and teaches everyone with all wisdom. There is a work to be done in evangelizing and discipling the people. It includes teaching them and warning them. He says all of this work is intended for this aim: that everyone may be presented as mature in Christ. Paul has in mind the day in which the saints stand before God, or Christ returns into the world. He wants the Christians he ministered to to be mature in Christ.

This is why he toils. He struggles with the energy Christ provides and works in him to do the work.

This passage has a lot for us to glean from and think about for our own lives. Here are several take-aways and application for us to consider:

1. The redemptive plan of God has always included the Gentiles. The spreading of the gospel beyond Israel was not an accident or a Plan B. It was always the plan of God to take the gospel to the nations. The scattering of the nations and confusion of their languages in Genesis 11 is a significant moment in history. Genesis 12 is the establishing of the covenant with Abraham to make him a great nation. But the goal of that nation was always to be a blessing to all the nations. That fulfillment was always centered on the coming of Jesus. The scattered nations in Genesis 11 would be reconciled into a new people, not marked by geography, skin color, or language, but through Christ.

2. Our labors to make Christ known locally and around the world fill up the afflictions Christ suffered at the cross. The way the Gentiles are brought into the fold is through the work of spreading the gospel. The fulfillment of Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28 happens when we make Jesus known, and proclaim the salvation found in him alone to others. As we go, we are filling up what is lacking in his afflictions. His afflictions happened to secure a bride. He ransomed and paid for them at the cross. Our going fills up those afflictions because our sharing brings them into the fold.

Are you laboring? Are you involved in making Christ known? Make a habit of talking about Jesus with others. Make a habit of giving to the work of spreading the gospel.

3. Teaching God's Word is the primary means for people's maturity in the faith. How do people come to faith and mature in the faith? Through the teaching and proclamation of the Word of God. Paul's toil is to teach and warn so they can be presented as mature. We need to catch this. We will only grow as mature as our understanding of God's Word. It is through God's Word we understand the character of God, we understand His ways and workings in the world, we understand His will for us, we understand who we are and who He has made us to be, we understand what our condition and problem is and how to be reconciled through Christ, we understand our future and where human history is heading. In other words, the way we grow in wisdom, holiness, knowledge, and all the other markers of maturity, is through the Word. And this is how you help others to mature as well.

A. Getting the interpretation right matters. This is also why we want to labor to interpret texts properly. So many people have stunted their spiritual growth because they don't interpret the Bible correctly.

B. Not everything is a mystery or open-handed. When we talk about interpreting texts with humility, we're talking about when we encounter these difficult texts. We are not saying that we should question if we know the plain meaning of passages, or pretend like we could be wrong about simple things like: Jesus is the Son of God who alone pays for sins and gives salvation to all who believe. We don't say..."I think" or "maybe, I could be wrong." No, this is plain. We hold loosely on those things where we are not sure.

C. Interpret Scripture with Scripture. We let the Bible interpret the Bible. How do we know Paul isn't saying Jesus' sacrifice lacked something we need? Because we know Jesus accomplished a once and for all sacrifice. We know nothing can be added to it. It is faith alone in what Jesus did. So we know our interpretation of Paul can't be that he is saying Jesus failed to provide something. Scripture interprets Scripture.

4. Our labors to serve Christ are fueled by our efforts AND Christ's power. I love how Paul says he labors and toils, but it is through the power and energy that Christ works in him. What this means is that **1.** there is a labor and toil we should give toward the kingdom of God. We should give our time, gifts, and energy to seeing the work of God advance in the world. **2.** But we should also recognize that we do not labor in our own strength alone. God works through us. He empowers our labor. And one of our prayers should be that He would increase our energy and power to do this work.

Do you feel tired in your work for the Lord? Do you feel like quitting from serving or sharing your faith? Do you feel like stopping that financial support of the ministry? Remember that our efforts and labor can only go so far if we do it out of our own strength. But Paul says it is Christ who energizes and empowers his work. Let's ask the Lord to do the same in our lives. Let's pray for His power. Let's be dependent on Him, not ourselves. But let's also give ourselves to the work. He empowers those who toil.

5. Maturing in the faith should be a goal of every Christian. The work Paul labors to accomplish is presenting the believers as mature in Christ. This is not just his goal, but THE goal of the Christian life. We want to mature into Christlikeness and reflect him through our own life. He is the sinless Savior. He was the perfectly obedient Son. He is Second Adam, the True Adam, the human being that all human beings were made to be,

but failed to be because of sin. But now through the forgiveness he provides, and the power he supplies, we can actually mature to become like him.

Christ is held out to us as our hope, our Savior, and our example. We look to him, not our neighbors, to know what our lives should look like. And we repent of our sins in order to bring our lives into alignment with his.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) Do you feel like you can adequately interpret and understand Scripture? What are you doing to increase your understanding?
- 2) Why does Paul rejoice in his sufferings?
- 3) What does Paul mean when he says he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?
- 4) What is the mystery hidden for ages and generations?
- 5) Paul's aim is to present everyone mature in Christ.
 - a) Are you in Christian community (Life Groups, D Groups, or MDWK) so that you are growing in wisdom and will be presented as mature? If not, why not? **Sign up through the Connect Card to join a Life Group or the next round of MDWK classes.**
 - b) If you are in Christian community, how can your group work together more to reach this aim?
 - c) How are you personally making disciples of Jesus?
- 6) What energizes us and sustains us for making disciples?