

Last week we learned that Jesus Christ is the Creator and the Sustainer of all things because He is God. All things, everything, was created *by Him, through Him, and for Him* – for His purposes. Jesus had a purpose when He created this world, and He had a purpose when He created you.

A truck driver was hauling a load of 15 penguins to the zoo, but unfortunately, his truck broke down on the way. Eventually, he waved down another truck and offered the driver \$500 to take the penguins to the zoo.

The next day the first truck driver got his truck fixed and drove into town and couldn't believe his eyes! Just ahead of him he saw the second truck driver crossing the road with the 15 penguins waddling single file behind him. He jumped out of his truck, ran up to the guy and said, "What's going on? I gave you \$500 to take these penguins to the zoo!"

To which the man replied, "I did take them to the zoo, but I had money left over, so we're going to the movies."

That guy didn't fully understand what he was supposed to be doing, and likewise, many believers don't understand what they're supposed to be doing, and so, that's what we are going to talk about this morning – serving well.

Now, before we dig in, let's talk about the Apostle Paul for a moment. As you know, before Paul became Paul, he was known as Saul of Tarsus – a devout Jew, from the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, and a man who zealously persecuted anyone who dared to name the name of Jesus and follow after Him. Saul was a one-man wrecking machine who ravaged the early church.

One day, after Stephen had been stoned to death with the approval of Saul, he was on his way to Damascus with authority from the high priest to arrest and imprison and, if need be, kill Christians. Men, women, young and old – it didn't matter to Saul. As far as he was concerned, he was doing God's work, it was his passion, and that work was to crush this new Christian movement called "*the Way*".

Well at midday, while on the road approaching Damascus, Saul saw a light from heaven brighter than the sun shining all around him. He fell to the ground, and Saul heard a voice saying, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**" Saul asked, "**Who are you, Lord?**" And the Lord said, "**I am Jesus who you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.**"

Saul had been hunting the church, but he had no idea that the head of the church was hunting him. The hunter was hunted down, and Saul – now a changed man, who would later be known as the Apostle Paul – was a man with a new purpose for the Lord chose him to be a minister. Paul didn't ask for it, he didn't seek it, and he certainly didn't earn it – instead, by God's grace and mercy, he was chosen for the role of sharing the Gospel to the Gentiles – the role that came at a heavy cost for the sake of Christ.

In **2 Corinthians 11**, Paul confronts some false apostles – imposters who claimed to be superior to Paul, proclaiming a different gospel, and unfortunately, they had gained an audience in the church. For Paul, the Gospel was at stake, and so in his confrontation, Paul gave evidence that he was a true servant of Christ, and he explained what it cost him. Beginning with **verse 23**, and I am reading from the NLT, Paul shares what he had faced. He says,

²³ **Are they servants of Christ?** *I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea.* ²⁶ *I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not.* ²⁷ *I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.* ²⁸ *Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.*

I think it's fair to say that Paul knew a thing or two about suffering, in fact, as he writes this very letter to the Colossians, he is in confinement in Rome awaiting trial on false charges.

So, with Paul's suffering as our background, let's pick up where we left off in **Colossians 1** beginning with **verse 24**. Paul tells us,

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.

What comes to mind when you hear the word *suffering*?

Like most people, you probably think about pain, misery, sadness, or something like that. At the moment, I think of kidney stones and lower back pain, but that's just me. Now, if you are really spiritual, maybe you think about the suffering of Jesus on the cross – but whatever you are thinking, chances are, what you don't think about is *rejoicing*, but that's what Paul says as he begins to discuss his own experiences: **“I rejoice in my sufferings.”**

That might be hard to understand, and Paul might seem a little crazy, but fortunately for us he gives us an explanation – he shares the reason why he can rejoice in his suffering. Paul says, as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, he knows that his suffering is for the sake of others. He was able to see that his suffering, as bad as it might be, was for the greater good of others – for the church. His suffering had a purpose – a purpose greater than himself – God was using it, and through Paul's suffering he was allowed, in some measure, to identify with Jesus who also suffered for the greater good of others.

Now, if you take a look at the last portion of the verse, Paul says something that is somewhat confusing. He says, that his suffering fills up **what is lacking in Christ's afflictions**. So, what in the world does Paul mean by that?

At first glance, this may sound like there was something lacking in the Lord's suffering and death on the cross – that's what it sounds like – but it is clear throughout the entire New Testament that the Lord's suffering on the cross was complete and sufficient for the salvation of all who put their trust in Him. We know that nothing was lacking in the Lord's suffering on the cross. He paid for our sins in full. When Jesus said on the cross **“It is finished”** that's what He meant. Our sin debt – all of it, was fully paid by Him once and for all. So, if this has nothing to do with the Lord's suffering on the cross, then what is Paul telling us here?

Well first off, that Greek word for **afflictions** is *thlipsis*, and that word is never used for the suffering of Jesus on the cross – never – so right off the bat we know that Paul is not talking about Christ's suffering for the sin of the world – he's talking about something else and it's this:

Just as the world hated Jesus during His earthly ministry, so the world will also hate His followers – His body – the church. There are many in this world, even today, some 2000 years later, who resent Jesus. Even the mention of His name is an offense to many. Some of you know this firsthand, in fact, you experience this within your own family.

Jesus is hated, but Jesus is not physically here – but His followers are. Paul is saying, they hate me because they hate Jesus. They can't get to Jesus, so they take it out on me because I follow Him and it's my turn to suffer on behalf of His body – the church.

Listen, if you are really following Jesus Christ, you are going to rub some people the wrong way. You are going to offend some people because you take a stand for Christ. There is a cost and you might suffer to some degree, but in your suffering, you can rejoice because you are taking your turn just like Paul took his, you are identifying with Jesus who suffered for you – drawing ever so nearer to Him.

You know, Paul knew that suffering was in store for him from the very start. Let's go back to **Acts 9**, beginning with **verse 10** and I will show you what I mean.

¹⁰ Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord."¹¹ And the Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying,¹² and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."¹³ But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he did 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 bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Paul knew he was to suffer after his Damascus Road experience – there was a purpose for his suffering – it was for the sake of Christ and for the benefit of others. That's what he tells us as he continues with **verse 25**.

Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,

I've been looking forward to sharing this verse with you. Paul says that he was **made a minister**, and I want to speak about this for a moment because you may be thinking this has nothing to do with you, but you would be wrong and let me explain.

In the Greek, the word **minister** is *diakonos* which describes a simple humble servant, and the Greeks used this word *diakonos* to describe those serving in demeaning and degrading tasks, but here Paul uses this exact same word to

describe his God-given role. Paul was a *diakonos* – a servant, and that describes every single person who knows Jesus Christ. Every Christian is a *diakonos* – a servant. Every Christian has been called to serve with whatever spiritual gifts, and time, and resources the Lord has provided to you. It may not be a calling to preach God’s Word as Paul’s was, but whatever your calling might be, the challenge is to fully carry it out in the power of the Holy Spirit – trusting the Lord to accomplish His work in you and through you.

And I also want to mention this. As you know, for those who have truly placed their faith in Jesus Christ – their sins have already been judged and paid for in full, and in that sense, their judgment was completed at the cross. By God’s mercy and grace, those who have placed their faith in Jesus will not be judged for sin – but, with that said, according to **1 Corinthians 3**, **2 Corinthians 5**, and **Romans 14**, there is a judgment for Christians, but it’s not a judgment for sin – it’s a judgment of our service.

For all believers, there will come a time when Jesus evaluates the quality of our work – of our service. One day, we will stand before the Lord for judgment of what we have done with what He has entrusted to us, and that judgment will result in rewards – rewards given and rewards withheld.

So, how are you using your time? How are you using the resources God that has provided to you? How are you using the spiritual gifts given to you? How are you serving? How are you loving? How are you caring? How are you sharing?

And if your answer is going to be “*well, I just can’t do much*” then I need to remind you of the *parable of the talents* explained in **Matthew 25**, where the master gave five talents to one servant, two to another, and one to a third, and even though these servants were given different amounts – all three of them were expected to use whatever had been entrusted to them and they were judged by their master accordingly. Maybe you can’t do much, but still, in the power of the Holy Spirit, you can make the most of what God has been given to you.

That’s what Paul did. He was called to preach – that was the role given to him as a servant, and beginning with **verse 26**, this was his message.

²⁶ that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, ²⁷ to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Paul calls his message **the mystery** – the mystery that is now revealed to all the saints – that being God’s saving mercy and grace, once proclaimed only among the Jews through their prophets and in their Scriptures, was now being proclaimed far and wide among the Jews and the Gentiles alike through the Person and the work of Jesus Christ.

The Gentiles who trusted Jesus could now experience all the benefits of being children of God, meaning they too were now included in the glory and the riches of God’s grace, they too received redemption and the forgiveness of sins, and not only that – every believer is placed in Christ and Christ is in every believer through the Person of the Holy Spirit, filled with the **hope of glory**.

This mystery was absolutely mind-boggling. Many of the Gentiles had difficulty believing this message after years of being treated as dogs, and the Jews would come to resent and reject this message, and Paul would suffer much for it – but to Paul it was all necessary in fulfilling the purpose to which he was called – that being to proclaim the Word of God – the message of the Gospel – saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

The mystery of salvation would come to the Gentiles – to us, and in **verse 28**, Paul explains how he did this. He says,

We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

Paul says, **we proclaim Him**. Paul didn’t preach politics, or philosophy, or even a system of theology. That’s not what he preached. Paul’s message was about a Person. Jesus was the centerpiece of his message, and all of the theology that came with his preaching, and there was a lot of it in his letters, was still centered on the Person of Jesus Christ.

Paul could not preach the Gospel without preaching Christ, because Christ is the good news. He is the Gospel.

In his preaching, Paul said that he **admonished** people. That seems to suggest that out of his concern like a father, he cautioned and warned those who would listen to change their attitudes and to change their actions, and then he **taught** them and instructed them and encouraged them with wisdom so that they may grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ and become faithful and spiritually mature followers. This is what Paul did, it was his passion, he was consumed by it, and it’s something we are to do as well.

*Kent Hughes relates the story of a 70-year-old, blind, uneducated African woman who got saved. Filled with gratitude to the Savior, she wanted to do something for Christ. So, she went to the missionary with her French Bible and asked him to underline **John 3:16** in red. The missionary wondered what she was doing, but he watched as she took her Bible and sat in front of a boys' school in the afternoon.*

When school was dismissed, she would call a boy or two and ask them if they knew French. When they proudly said that they did, she would say, "Please read the passage underlined in red." When they did, she would ask, "Do you know what this means?" And then she would "proclaim Christ" to them. Over the years, 24 young men became pastors due to her simple work.

This is an elderly blind woman who made the most of what God had given her. This is a woman who understood that her purpose was to proclaim Christ, and that's what she did in her own way. That's what Paul did, and that's what we are supposed to do as well.

Was it easy for Paul? Absolutely not. Listen to what he says in **verse 29**.

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Paul admits he labored, and that word implies it was to the point of exhaustion.

Yes, at times, the work was agonizing – the work was difficult, the work was a struggle, the work was hard, often times it resulted in suffering, but thankfully, the Lord was mightily at work within Paul.

You see, Paul was appointed to do the work – to serve well in his role, and it was the Lord who empowered Paul to do it. Paul could labor and strive without burning out, because he did so by relying on God's power. When Paul worked, so did the Lord.

Now, let me close with this: Everyone who has trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord has a calling and a gifting to serve the Lord well. All of us are appointed by God to be His ministers – His *diakonos* – His humble servants in some shape, form, or fashion – and as we serve and follow the Lord, He may lead us down a difficult road – there may be suffering for His sake and for the sake of others, but we can still find joy, we can still have this inner contentment because we know God is doing something in us and through us, He has a purpose, and ultimately, that is to draw us closer to Himself. So, our challenge is to serve Him well.

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