



Sermon – November 8, 2020
Phillip Bethancourt

Verses Covered This Week

Colossians 1:24 - 5

Romans 5:3 – 5

Acts 9:16

Acts 26:15

1 Corinthians 4:1 - 2

Let's grab our Bibles together. We're going to spend our time this morning in Colossians chapter 1, verses 24 and 25. And as you turn there, whether you're in person or online, if you're a guest with us this morning, welcome home. We're glad you're here. Jesus tells us He is the bread of life and this morning we're coming to His word to be fed. One of the things that our church is committed to is verse by verse preaching. And if it wasn't for that, today's text would be an easy one for a preacher to set aside. Let's skip it. It's an uncomfortable topic. It's a little bit complex to understand. Paul is focusing our hearts this morning on God's call to suffering. And it would be a whole lot easier to just blow right by this and keep going through the text. But we're going to sit here and let the Spirit work in our hearts and speak to us today to walk us through what it looks like to suffer in a way that honors Jesus. So follow along with me with what Paul tells us here beginning in verse 24 when he says:

[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, [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,

20 years ago this past week, Bill Shepherd and two other men set out on a long journey. They hopped in a vehicle and travelled for two days and their destination was a very primitive place. There was no power. There was no hot water. There was no working toilet. But they weren't setting out to Big Bend or heading off to The Rockies. They were on a two-day journey, not in a car, but in a spaceship. They were the first ones to make a landing on the International Space Station. Which just marked its 20-year anniversary this week. And they inherited that primitive situation but, 20 years ago what it was is totally different from what it is today. The International Space Station stretches now a hundred yards in length. There's over eight miles of electrical wires an acre worth of solar panels. And perhaps most importantly, three working toilets. Now

what would have brought Bill and these two other men to this place? They were pioneers. They were fore-runners. They were going before others, putting their own lives at risk, willing to suffer the inconveniences that primitive structure for that season. Why? Because they saw, not just what it was, but what it was becoming. And they understood the mission and recognized that the temporary misery was worth the success of the mission. And as we turn our attention to Paul's word to us this morning, that's the picture that we get that God is giving us of Paul himself. This faithful minister. This one who was willing to suffer. He is willing to lay down his own life, his own priorities and to sacrifice them for the sake of the gospel.

Now up until this time in the book of Colossians, Paul has been introducing the entire letter to us. But now in verse 24, he turns his attention from his gospel message now to begin talking about his gospel mission. And what we're going to notice this morning as we work our way through it is that the call to follow Jesus is a call to suffer and to serve for the sake of the gospel. So notice how he talks first about this suffering for the sake of the gospel back in verse 24. He, just remember, this is right after he's called us to persevere in our faith; to press on in the midst of God's call in salvation on our life. And now he is going to begin to discuss the suffering that makes that endurance difficult. When we suffer for the sake of the gospel, it shapes us in several ways. And you'll notice as he begins verse 24, he shows us how suffering shapes our character. Do you see how he says it? He says, now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. It starts there with that phrase, now I. There is this pivot in the text that's happening. Paul's beginning to speak about his own ministry, his own work amongst the Colossians. And he begins by talking about the nature of his sufferings; those misfortunes, those hardships and trials that he's encountered for the sake of the gospel. And we could look back all through the New Testament and see example after example of the way that Paul suffered for the sake of the gospel. Now the Colossians would have known that to be true because when they received this letter, they would have known that Paul was writing it to them from a Roman prison. He was in prison for the gospel. He had experienced persecution and all sorts of hardship. He was suffering for the sake of the gospel. But what does Paul have in mind here when he speaks of suffering? Well, yes, of course, it's the hardship, the persecution, the difficulties, the imprisonments like he faced. But what we need to recognize is that each one of us who are called to follow Jesus will experience suffering in this world. We are living in the midst of a warzone between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. Why would we be surprised when hardship comes? When you get that bad phone call. When you have that difficult breakup. When things don't go the way that you planned. That suffering is part of what it looks like to be faithful in a broken world. But notice what happens here. Paul tells us that he is suffering for the sake of the Colossians. He is doing it on their behalf. He is doing it for their sake. There is a sense of a selfless nature to his suffering. And while he's doing that, we would expect him to say in this text, "Now I endure suffering for your sake." Or maybe he might say, "Now I put up with suffering for your sake." But what's the verb right there at the beginning of verse 24? Now I rejoice in suffering for your sake. The suffering brings about gladness. It brings about joy. And if you're anything like me, that's not often the way I feel when I suffer, is it? No. But Paul responds to his suffering with joy. And I want you to see why. If you'll hold your spot here and slide back to Romans chapter 5. I want you to see why Paul is rejoicing in the midst of his suffering. Notice with me Romans 5, verses 3 – 5. Why would Paul say he rejoices in his suffering? It's because he knows his suffering is shaping his character. Look at how he says it in Romans 5:3.

³Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, (why) knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Do you see this chain reaction he speaks of here? This sequence that takes place that suffering leads to endurance. Endurance leads to character. Character leads to hope and that hope does not disappoint. Because God is meeting us in the moment by His Spirit and through His love. So Paul can rejoice in his suffering as he tells us in Colossians 1 because he knows that the hardships of life is what God is using to cultivate humility in us. To conform us to the image of His Son. Suffering makes us selfless. What happens is Paul is showing us here is that when we see suffering through a gospel lens, we no longer focus primarily on our pain, but on God's purpose, on His goodness, the way that He meets us in the moment. And we can rejoice in our sufferings like Paul because what it signals to us is that God has counted us worthy to suffer for the sake of Jesus. The Scripture lays it out as a high honor that we might be on the battlefield even if it means we may experience some wounds along the way. And that part of what God is using is taking our valleys and shaping us to be more like Jesus. Paul embraces suffering because suffering shapes our character. But notice the way this goes on because we see in the middle of verse 24, the way that suffering also shapes our calling. He tells us there,

[In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's affliction](#)

And here's where the text gets complicated. This is the part that will be easy to skip because it's difficult to understand. But let's work our way through it. What is the purpose of the suffering that Paul endures? He tells us right there. It is in order to fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. That verb, fill up, means to supplement or to complete or share. It's, the only time it's used here in the New Testament, and it sends a signal as if you're completing something that was started by someone else. It's like the guy on deck who's now coming up to bat in a baseball game. And what is it that Paul is filling up? It tells us there, what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Those things that seem to be missing or deficient. A sense of need in the sufferings or afflictions of Jesus. And it's interesting that he uses this phrase because this would have been exactly the type of thing that the false teachers that were amongst the Colossian church were seeking to deceive others with. They were teaching that Jesus was not enough. That there was something missing. That there was something lacking and that something else must be added. And it seems on the surface here as if Paul is saying the same thing. So what does he mean when he says he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's affliction?

Just this past week I was over at our boys' school. Our youngest, Hudson, is in kindergarten and there was an even that happened to bring together the boys, the kids, with their dads. It was called, Boats and Buddies. They're learning about Christopher Columbus and that voyage to the new world. And so each family, the dad and the child, were intended to construct their own boat. And so we took some household products. We fashioned them together in our favorite pirate ship. We even put a few candy corn in their as buried treasure because nobody likes Candy Corn and wants to eat it. It's the only good use of it during the holiday season. But when we showed up, there was about a dozen kids there with their dads. And before we started, we placed all our boats on the table. We were one of the first ones there. We were feeling pretty good about it until the others started arriving. There was one guy who had LED lights around his boat.

Another guy, who happens to be in this church, had a motorized engine that could blow his boat across the water. One committed hunter had even sacrificed one of his own duck decoys and hollowed it out in order to make a boat. Now imagine with me for a moment. If they saw our small little craft there on the table and out of pity for us came alongside and put their arm around my shoulder and said, “Hey, man, you got that thing a long way. But let me see if I can help you get it across the finish line.” And then from there they proceeded to bust out all these additional features and make it what it wasn’t able to be on its own. There’s this sense in which, when you look at verse 24, it almost feels like that’s what Paul is saying about the sacrifices of Jesus. You got us pretty far, but I’ll take it the rest of the way. That your sacrifice is insufficient. That there is something lacking in your afflictions. But is that what he’s saying? Was Jesus’ sacrifice not enough for us? By no means. So what then does Paul have in mind here? Here’s what he’s saying. In our suffering we fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Jesus, not to establish his gospel mission, but to extend his gospel mission. That’s the picture. Jesus sacrifices on our behalf, but now we suffer to see that gospel mission extended. And that was true in the life of Paul. He is taking the gospel to the Gentiles including these Colossians. And what we’re saying here is Paul is showing us that our suffering doesn’t accomplish salvation, but it may be part of what God uses to apply that salvation to others. So think about, you don’t need to turn there, but just listen to the way that Jesus speaks to Paul, about Paul, in Acts 9:16 after the Damascus Road experience. He says this:

¹⁶For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of My name.

In other words, there is a sense of purpose, a sense of calling, embedded in the suffering we experience. That our suffering shapes our calling and who God has designed us to be. Part of what it helps to endure in the midst of our suffering is that we realize the greater purpose that God is going to accomplish through it by extending his gospel missions. Our difficulties have a destination. Our trials have a trajectory. Our misery has a mission. Our pain has a purpose. When we go through these seasons of difficulty, we can endure them because we understand what God is doing to shape our calling. But notice how he goes on there and in the last part of this verse he also shows us how suffering shapes our community. Do you see what he says? He says, he suffers for the sake of his body that is the church. Now we know in the New Testament, the imagery of the body is used over and over again to speak about the church. That Christ is its head and we are His body. And so Paul is raising another dimension. Why should we be willing to suffer? Because suffering shapes our community. It forms the church. It affects the entire body. With Jesus as the head and us as the members. And part of what it means that we are filling up the afflictions of Jesus and what is lacking there, it plays out like this. If we are one body with Christ as the head, this means that what is lacking in the afflictions of Jesus is being filled up by our own suffering. And how does that work? When the body suffers, the head suffers. There’s a sense in which when we experience suffering in this world, Jesus is experiencing it right there with us. He is for us. He is making a way for us. And so when we experience those external persecutions, those internal pressures, it is not just us, but our head of the body of the church that’s experiencing them as well. That’s why when Paul is recounting his experience on the Damascus Road, when he’s on trial in Acts 26, he tells us in verse 15 of the words that Jesus said to him when he said,

¹⁵I said, “Who are you, Lord?” And the Lord said, “I am Jesus who you are persecuting.

Paul wasn't persecuting Jesus; he was persecuting the church. But what Jesus does is he reframes the nature of our suffering. When the church suffers, the head suffers. Jesus himself is there with us bearing with us in those difficult moments of affliction. And as a matter of fact, it's only because of the suffering he's done on the cross that we can stand in the midst of our suffering. Do you remember the way He gave Himself up for you? Do you remember how He sacrificed His own desires, His own body, His own flesh and blood to be poured out for your sins. He suffered so that we can be set free from our suffering in this world when we put our trust in Him. And I want you to look around this room for a moment. You see the other people that are a part of this church? No, I'm being serious. Actually look at other people in this room. Paul tells us that when we suffer, we suffer for the sake of others in the church. When we are experiencing those difficult moments, that might be part of what God is going to use to help others in this room persevere. And I'll tell you at least one way I see that play out in the body of Christ right here in College Station this week. There's a friend of mine who's a college student who not long ago lost his own brother to addiction, through an overdose. The hardest thing he's ever been through in his life. Well God used that scar, that wound, that suffering that he experienced to comfort others with the comfort that he has experienced through the loss of his brother to addiction. Because one of his close friends this week lost a friend of his to suicide. And that man that was wrestling with the difficulty and fallout of losing a friend to suicide was able to come to this man who had experienced the loss of a brother to addiction and there was comfort that was brought. The suffering of one buoyed the suffering of the other in the midst of that trial. And when Paul is speaking here of how in his flesh he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. When he is suffering, he is doing it for the sake of the church. That their suffering shapes our community.

But I want you to see how this text ends. Because Paul continues after verse 24 and brings us into verse 25 where he shifts his attention from suffering for the sake of the gospel now to serving for the sake of the gospel. So look at way he says it there in verse 25. He tells us,

[²⁵of 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.](#)

Paul begins to talk here about serving; our service in response to what Christ has done for us in the gospel. And there's a call to serve here that is rooted in several different dimensions. And you'll notice the way he speaks of how we are called first to serve for the sake of the stewardship that's been given to us. So you see him use that language of stewardship. A stewardship that comes from God. Paul says, "I became a minister." When Jesus met him on the Damascus Road, he didn't just make him a Christian, He called him to be a servant of the gospel. That's what that word means in the original language. It's the same word we saw last week he uses in verse 23. It's the idea of one who is an authorized messenger who is sent to serve on behalf of someone else. And that's why Paul uses this stewardship language. It has the idea of management or administration. In those time periods, the most common use of this term would be for someone who ran and operated a large home or estate. The owner of that location would empower them and entrust them to lead on their behalf. Maybe think about it in the same way you would a general manager at an auto dealership, or at a restaurant. They have been empowered and entrusted to serve on behalf of someone else. When Paul calls us to be stewards, that's the image. Troy Nichols set out on a long pandemic road trip, but it didn't go all the way to International Space Station, but it did travel through ten states; over 4,200 miles. He made

multiple stops along the way. But it wasn't for the sake of sight-seeing; it was for the purpose of delivering puppies. You've probably seen a lot of people during this COVID season are getting COVID dogs. And that's created the industry if you are looking for work to where you can make money delivering pets from the breeder to the final recipient. And in the case of this road trip that Troy as on, he travelled through 4,200 miles, over 26, in order to deliver 26 dogs in ten different states. Now I'm just trying to put myself in his shoes. You're rolling down in this minivan, you've got tons of dogs in the back. How do you feed them? How do you endure the barking? Where do you sleep at night? Why would you want to do that? That's the main question I'm asking. But in that moment, think about his role. Those are not his dogs. He doesn't own them. He didn't breed them. He didn't buy them. He's not going to keep them. But for that season, they have been entrusted to him. He has been empowered and qualified to be a steward of them for as long as he has them. To fulfil the mission to which he's been called. And when Paul's speaks here of our service as a stewardship, isn't that the image? That these things of the gospel are not ours to own. But they are ours to steward. We have been entrusted with that gospel; empowered to serve others for the sake of the gospel. And that is what God is calling us to carry out. It is a stewardship that is from God and for others. That's why when we talk about service, at the heart of what we mean is that we are called to be good stewards of God's gifts for the good of others and the glory of God. And Paul speaks about the nature of that stewardship in 1 Corinthians 4, verses 1 and 2. Just listen to what he says.

¹This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

In other words, Paul is saying, being a steward isn't just something you do, it's something that you are. And the fundamental qualification for serving God, to being His good steward, is to be faithful. That's the mark of the service that Paul is modelling to the Colossians. You don't have to go very far to see that service on display right here at Central. Next week, as part of our services, we're going to get the chance to celebrate one of our own ministers, Chuck Bestor, who's marking 25 years of service at Central. Isn't that amazing? He's been such a blessing to us. He has led so well in our operations, our administration, and our leadership. Both at Coulter when we were back there, building these new facilities, being in here the last nearly 20 years. And we get the chance to recognize that. And I guarantee you that if you ask Chuck, what was the key to making it 25 years, he'd say, "I was just trying to be faithful with the stewardship that God's given me." In the same way that Paul is speaking of here, he is calling us to be faithful stewards of the gospel. But notice he tells us also the purpose of that service, at the very end of verse 25, that we are called to serve for the sake of the Scripture given to us. Do you see how he says it? He's been made a steward in order to make the word of God fully known. That idea fully known, to make complete, to give a full sense of. In other words, his ministry, his focus, his purpose, the reason for serving, is so that he can bring the whole gospel to the whole life. That we can fully know the things of God so that we can be fully known by God. So that he can shape us into who we are called to be. And that is exactly our goal here at Central. The reason that we minister, the reason that we serve is to unleash the full power of the word of God on the hearts of our people so that you will be empowered to serve others for the sake of the gospel. You've probably seen the headlines buried well below all the election news this week, that this past week has been the highest number of new cases for COVID during this entire pandemic season. Over 125,000 in one day. And one of the chief problems that we have during this time period is what's known as asymptomatic carrier. Somebody who has the disease but when you

look at them you wouldn't be able to tell it. Just by seeing them live their life, you wouldn't know that they actually were infected. And I can't help but wonder if we face a similar danger today when it comes to service. What if some of us are asymptomatic Christians? Where if someone were to look at our life, to watch the way we live, they would not be able to see the marks or indications that would show them that our hearts have been changed by the gospel. But Paul tells us here the reason we are called to serve is so that the word of God might be fully known. So that the people of God might see and follow, believe, and trust.

This call to service, this call to suffering, really hit home for me this weekend. There's a guy who came through our church back when I was a student. He was class of '03. His name was Ben Arbour. Ben was in the Corps, he got married, went on to have four kids, and he headed off to Southwestern Seminary to do a degree, and then began to work in the real world while he's working towards a PhD, and had just wrapped that up. And he was now teaching in an adjunct capacity at Southwestern Seminary. Seemed like everything he was hoping for was there. And he was a faithful member at Wedgwood Baptist Church right there in Fort Worth. And his friends would speak about his faithful service. The way he would sacrifice for the sake of others. It seemed as if the Arbour family's dreams were finally becoming a reality. But on Friday night, those dreams became a nightmare. Ben and his wife, Meg, were out on a date. When they were coming back home they attempted to turn on a road, not realizing that bearing down on them were two cars in a street race. Travelling well faster than anybody should be on those roads. And while their car missed one, it was struck by the other. And Ben and Meg both lost their lives leaving behind four kids. When I got that news this weekend, that just really hit a really raw nerve after me losing my friend John just a few months ago in a similar way. And as I heard from friends that knew Ben and as I've watched media reports about what happened, I was struck by something one of his friends said about him. That speaks to the heart of what Paul is saying to us this morning. Here's what he said. "It's been devastating. Ben and Meg were best friends and they lived their life with one thing in mind and that was the glory of God in Jesus. They were faithful in all their friendships and faithful to their church and they are standing in the presence of Christ now." And elsewhere, their pastor Dale Braswell, said, "Their priority in life was Jesus." I just can't help but wonder today, Central family, when the Lord brings us home, are people going to say that about us? Are they going to say about you and me, our priority in life was Jesus? No matter what we face, are we going to live in such a way that in our suffering and in our serving that people can't help but recognize the one priority in our life? The call of the gospel to each one of us this morning from Colossians 1 is to suffer and to serve for the sake of that gospel even if it costs us our lives, just like our Savior.

Let's pray together.

Father, we're coming to you, some with weary hearts, some with broken spirits, they are under the weight of suffering, they feel that sense of pain. I pray that in this moment, Lord, that You would bear them up on eagle's wings. That You would help them to stand firm. That You would renew their strength. And Lord, I'm asking You, Father, that You would empower our people to be faithful stewards of Your gospel. That we would be relentless in serving others. That we'd be turning away from our own desires so that we might put our attention and focus only on Christ on making Your gospel fully known to our community and to the ends of the earth. We ask these things in Jesus name. Amen.