



# Fulfilling Your God-Given Ministry

[1:24-29]

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*“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 that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, 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. And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (1:24-29).*

On the road to Damascus, en route to persecute Christians he might find in that city, Saul of Tarsus was bathed in brilliance as he encountered the living Lord Jesus. Left temporarily blind by the experience, Saul (whose name was later changed to Paul) was guided into the city where he sat in his own personal darkness for three days awaiting further instructions.

In the meantime, the Lord spoke to a soul-winner named Ananias and commissioned him to go speak to Saul. At first, Ananias was very hesitant to go face this killer of Christians. But the Lord said, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him

how much he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:15, 16). As Saul was baptized and became a Christian, his life was forever changed.

Twenty years passed before Paul penned a letter to the church at Colossae. As he wrote to this young church, he became autobiographical for a few moments, and in a few lines he revealed how the message of Ananias given to him on that day so long ago had been fulfilled in his life.

In Colossians 1:24-29, Paul wrote about three things that had been true of his life: his miseries, the mystery of God that he had to share with others, and his ministry. Each of these has something to say to us about our own Christian experience.

## **THE MISERIES OF PAUL (1:24)**

First, Paul spoke of his miseries: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (1:24).

If you could meet Paul, you would probably be horrified. He was not a pretty sight. In his letters, he told of some sufferings he had endured for the cause of Christ. He had been flogged severely numerous times and on no less than five occasions received thirty-nine lashes from his Jewish brethren. Three times he had been beaten with sticks. He had been in stocks. He had been in chains. He had even been stoned once, to the point his opponents left him for dead. Had you

ever met this man, you would immediately recognize him as the victim of terrible abuse.

Beyond all that, Paul evidently had a problem with his eyes that gave his face a distracting appearance. If possible, he says in Galatians 4, the Galatian Christians would have given him their own eyes to help him out.

Here he was, this battered old man with scars and bruises from head to toe, writing this letter to the Colossians, and he says: "I rejoice to have undergone all these miseries, to have endured all these sufferings. I'm *happy* about them." He was not just resigned to them; he was rejoicing over them. Why was Paul so happy to be brutally treated? Why was Paul rejoicing that his body was covered with scars? Was he some kind of masochist? Was this the raving of a demented mind that found some sort of perverted pleasure in suffering and misery?

The answer is simple. He was happy because he was helping to complete the sufferings of Christ.

Many have misunderstood Paul's statement, thinking that he was saying, "Calvary was insufficient to save us from our sins, and to the sufferings of Christ I must add some of my own to complete the atonement for my transgressions." If we carry that view to its logical conclusion, we end up with the doctrine of purgatory, the idea that Christ had not suffered enough and that I must suffer some; that His pain went so far but it did not take me all the way; and that I must complete His sufferings by going through it myself to save myself.

To believe that is to strike at the very core of the Christian message. The gospel is that Jesus paid all my penalty; He did for me completely what I could not do for myself at all, short of spending an eternity in hell. To say that I must add anything to the sufferings of Christ at Calvary in order to finalize my salvation is to diminish His work at the cross.

Paul would certainly never suggest that he was somehow supplementing Calvary by his own suffering. He was very clear in his other writings that the work of Jesus and Jesus alone is all we need to get right with God. What does Paul mean?

Christ has not ceased to suffer. Have you ever thought of that? Until now you may have thought that once Calvary's work was done and Jesus was resurrected His suffering and anguish

were over. That is not true. His sufferings go on because His work is not finished. His work will always call for pain and suffering.

Jesus' redemptive work *is* finished. His suffering for sin *is* completed. But His suffering for the church is not over.

The word used in verse 24 translated "sufferings" was never used in the New Testament of what happened at the cross. It was never applied to the death of Christ. Those sufferings were sufferings of a different sort.

When a woman is in labor, she is bringing a child into the world. It is a distressing experience. It is a struggle. There is pain and anguish. Once she has brought the child into the world, the pain of birth is over. That suffering is finished. Do you think that completes the mother's suffering for that child? You know it does not. Now begins the suffering that is involved in bringing up that child. It may involve long hours throughout the night while a child is ill. It may involve all the agony of seeing that child make foolish decisions. The suffering of rearing that child continues. The suffering of bringing that child into the world is over, but the suffering of maturing that child goes on year after year.

Christ on the cross suffered sufficiently to bring you to birth into the family of God, to have your sins blotted out. Now He suffers the pain of bringing you to spiritual maturity. How often do we think about that? We cause the heart of Jesus grief through our foolish decisions and immature conduct as members of His spiritual family.

Therefore, Paul was saying, "I have a scarred, broken, bruised body in chains in prison, and I'm *happy* because it is Christ's pain. It is His sufferings for His body that I am experiencing. Christ is using me to strengthen His people and to build them up and to bring them to maturity. The anguish I experience is the anguish He would feel if He were still here in the flesh working with you."

To every elder, deacon, Bible class teacher, and home Bible study group leader in the Lord's church, when you work with Christians who disappoint you and fail you and cause you grief, rejoice! You are filling up in your flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His body, the church. No one comes to maturity without causing a lot of heartache along the way. And you are simply expressing here on earth for Jesus what He is feeling in the

throne room of heaven when His people disappoint Him.

### **THE MYSTERY OF GOD (1:25-27)**

Paul next spoke of the mystery he proclaimed:

Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints (1:25, 26).

God had given Paul a task; that task was to make known the best kept secret of the ages. He called it a “mystery.” The word “mystery” to us usually means something we do not know. That is not what the word really means here. The word “mystery” means that which was once unknown but is now known. In a mystery novel, we do not know “whodunit” in the story, but at the end of the novel all is made known. It is a mystery because what was once unknown is now known.

That was precisely what Paul meant here. God had given him the job of declaring that which was once unknown but which God wanted known. This secret was not discovered by man but disclosed by God. What was this secret, this mystery, that Paul proclaimed for God? “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” (1:27). Here was the secret, the mystery Paul had been given by God to proclaim: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

The secret was not that Jesus now lives in my heart. Though many Bible students believe that was what Paul meant, I do not. The secret was not the indwelling Christ. Many passages teach that great truth, but that is not the mystery.

Two clues help to understand this mystery. One is that the word “you” is plural in Greek, not singular. If Paul were saying that the secret is that Christ dwells in a Christian’s heart, he would have used the singular. But he used the plural: “Christ in you all.” When the pronoun is plural, the preposition “in” means “in the midst” or “among.” (Cf. John 1:14: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt *among* us”—literally, “in us.”)

Therefore, the mystery was “Christ among you all.”

Paul preached another clue to this mystery. Why did Paul not say: “Christ among *us*”? All

along through this letter Paul had written “we,” but now he left himself out. The secret Paul proclaimed is a secret which did not include Paul. It included the Colossians but not him. What was this secret? “Christ among you”—who? The Gentiles!

All along in their history the Jews thought that their coming Messiah was just for them. When the Messiah came He would live among the Israelites and drive the Gentiles out of the land of Palestine. No Jew, no Gentile, ever dreamed that God’s Anointed One, the Messiah, would be for the Gentiles as well! But the secret was out: Jesus is for all men.

Perhaps you think after nearly two thousand years that the mystery is not so shocking any more. But it is. We still struggle with the idea that Jesus is for everyone.

Colossians 1:23 is often taken to mean that the early church evangelized the whole world in the first century, but that is not what Paul meant as he said, “To every creature under heaven” (NIV). In Romans 15 Paul said he was trying to get to Spain with the gospel because no one had been there yet. In 1:23 Paul was saying that the gospel had been preached to every man and woman. No one had been excluded. In Christ all barriers of race, nationality, position, and birth have been broken down. Christ is for all.

We are not to preach to a select few. The gospel is not just for “our kind.” God’s great truth is that Christ is among all, He is the hope of glory for everyone in our community.

### **THE MINISTRY OF PAUL (1:28, 29)**

Because Paul believed that the gospel was for all and was willing to suffer for the gospel’s sake, his ministry was greatly affected: “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me” (1:28, 29).

#### **The Message**

Four things about Paul’s ministry are revealed in these two verses. First, he spoke about the message of his ministry. Paul said, “We proclaim Him,” or, “We preach Jesus” (1:28a). The focus of Paul’s ministry was always on Jesus—who He is and what He has done for all of mankind.

So often we want to talk about the church with our friends instead of talking about Jesus. That is getting the cart before the horse. Jesus said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself" (John 12:32). We need to make much of Jesus. He is to be the focus of our life and ministry. If Jesus is not our message, we have no message for a lost world.

### **The Method**

In proclaiming Jesus, Paul had a *twofold method*: "admonishing" and "teaching" (1:28b). His ministry had a positive and a negative dimension to it.

On the one hand, Paul warned people; he admonished them. Simply put, he counseled folks about their sin and the need to change their conduct in view of God's coming judgment. Every preacher has a responsibility to warn people about their sin, their false doctrine, and the consequences of disobedience.

It is difficult to confront people, to challenge their attitudes and behaviors. But it is part of the ministry. Before people will respond to the good news of the gospel, they need to hear the bad news. They need to have their sin exposed.

But admonition needs to be balanced with teaching. It is not enough to tell people that they are wrong. We must help them understand what it is that they need to begin to do. For Paul there was no such thing as abstract doctrine. Everything he taught had practical consequences for holy living.

This twofold method of ministry was not just for Paul or those in (so-called) full-time ministry. Every Christian has a responsibility to warn and teach others. Paul said, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, . . ." (3:16).

### **The Motive**

Teaching and admonishing is a ministry for all Christians. Why should we do this? For the same reason Paul did. The motive of Paul's ministry was this: "That we may present every man complete in Christ" (1:28c).

The goal of ministry is mature Christians. It is working hard to create a whole family of believers who are just like Jesus. We warn and teach one another in order to help all Christians to move toward becoming more fully the people God wants us to be.

Verse 28 also reminds me that the family of God has no unimportant people. Three times in the Greek text Paul used the phrase "every man." He said, "We warn *every* man and we teach *every* man so that we can present *every* man complete in Jesus Christ." Every man!

That must be the passion of the man who stands in the pulpit. It must be the passion of the shepherds who lead a flock of God's people. It ought to be the passion of each Christian—to see that every person in the family of God with whom we come in contact moves on toward spiritual maturity.

### **The Means**

Notice the means of Paul's ministry in verse 29: ". . . according to His power, which mightily works within me."

How hard it is to present everyone mature in Christ. It involves blood, tears, toil, and sweat. Pray for your elders. Pray for your Bible class teacher. Pray for your preacher. Anyone who takes on the task of bringing believers on to maturity has a real struggle ahead. Long hours, late nights, and one heartbreak after another will come. Ministry is not easy.

If you are trying to lead others on to maturity and you are beginning to wonder how much longer you can last, remember what Paul had discovered: While the effort is yours, the energy is His. God provides the strength for what He has asked you to do.

Paul was not alone in working hard in the ministry. Most likely, these Colossians had never seen Paul. They had been converted by Epaphras, one of Paul's converts. Epaphras had also worked hard: "Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondsman of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (4:12).

## **CONCLUSION**

We are not all apostles, but we all do have a God-given ministry. We are to warn and teach everyone. We are to share our faith and suffer as it is necessary to spread the gospel and to mature people in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you fulfilling your God-given ministry in the church?