

“Paul’s Model of Ministry”

Colossians 1:24-29

Turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians 1, where in just a minute we will read beginning with verse 24. We’re going to observe the Lord’s Supper in just a bit, but before we do, I want us to consider this text of Scripture. Adoniram Judson was one of the first American missionaries, serving in Burma (Myanmar). His years there were marked by remarkable fruit and profound suffering. He was born in 1788 in Massachusetts and grew up to be a brilliant, but spiritually restless young man. After coming to faith in Christ, he sensed God’s call to foreign missions, married Ann Hasseltine, and in 1812 sailed as part of America’s first group of overseas missionaries. The Judsons first arrived in India, but soon moved to the hostile, isolated kingdom of Burma. They faced linguistic barriers, a brutal climate, and widespread suspicion of foreigners. Judson labored for seven years before seeing his first convert, all while learning the Burmese language and even translating Scripture.

During the Anglo-Burmese War, he was falsely accused of espionage and endured two long years in a squalid prison, shackled and tortured. He lost his wife Ann and several children to disease and, in his grief, retreated into a deep depression. Despite these crushing losses, he slowly regained spiritual strength. Judson remained in Burma for nearly forty years. He translated the entire Bible into Burmese, as well as a Burmese-English dictionary, and he planted churches that would become the foundation of Burmese Christianity. By his death, the gospel took root in a land once considered to be impenetrable. Inspired by his life, a hymn writer wrote these words:

Henry Crocker — *“In spite of sorrow, loss, and pain, our course be onward still. We sow on Burma’s barren plain, we reap on Zion’s hill.”*

John 12:24—“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

In this passage that we're going to look at for a few minutes this morning, Paul will say something similar as he reflects on his own suffering for the sake of the gospel ministry. It hadn't been in vain, but was spiritually productive. (Read)

Beginning in verse 24 and through the next 11 verses or so Paul will refer to himself in the first person singular. And in doing so, he is explaining to the Colossians his intention in serving them in the ministry. Now, that word 'ministry' is a word that comes up frequently in the New Testament. It is the word *διάκονια* (*diakonia*), or *διάκονος* (*diakonos*) as it is found here in verses 23 and 25, translated as 'minister.' It means service or one who serves, practical help which is given to another. What do we mean when we refer to the 'ministry' of the local church? And what are 'ministers?' I sometimes wonder about folks who drive by this building, who've never been inside. Do you think they ever curious about what happens in here? What about those who lead? Are they real or fake? One writer has made an observation that we often define ministry in terms of what it is not:

- A commercial enterprise
- An entertainment center
- A manufacturing plant
- An educational institution

The question is, “Are we a healthy ministry?” Is it true that those who lead this ministry are trustworthy? A lot of people are skeptical these days, and if we were honest, their criticisms are not without some merit. The news has been filled with

stories of scandals, moral failures, and lawsuits. The ministry has been given a black eye by the abuses of a few. Those who lead ministries must be qualified because the Bible says we will be held to a higher standard. The Bible sets forth a very high standard for those who lead people in the ways of God—character, integrity, honesty. I suppose that is why this passage before us is of great importance, because it outlines some things that make for a healthy ministry and minister. Here we find Paul's model of ministry. Notice he says in verse 25, "of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God." In other words, "God made me a minister." There is this sense of calling upon his life as he is called to preach, commissioned of God to teach the Word, a herald of the King! Andrew Blackwood said that preaching should rank as the noblest work on earth. But have you noticed that in our own generation, it is fading? In our own time, expositors are hard to find. Those who go to the text, explain the meaning of the text, apply the text, and then get out of the way and let the message do its work. The decline of preaching is a symptom of the decline of the church in the western world. We are to proclaim the truth of God! Paul is a minister of the Word with a Word-based ministry. He reminds believers in these verses that this ministry involves suffering for Christ, proclaiming Christ, and depending on Christ. Three crucial elements. And so let's look at these one at a time.

1—SUFFERING for the sake of Christ's body (1:24)

"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."

Notice the word 'sufferings' there in verse 24. What comes to mind when you come across that word? Maybe it is an experience with suffering that you've faced in your own life. Or maybe it is a word you associate with pain, hardship, or difficulty. And more than likely, you would not use the word 'rejoice' in the

same sentence with the word ‘suffering.’ It is not a word that we would typically associate with rejoicing. And yet this is the word Paul uses to describe his suffering to the Colossians. He ‘rejoices’ in the midst of suffering. Why?

Obviously, he isn’t rejoicing in his sufferings for suffering’s sake. Rather, he could rejoice in suffering because he was well aware of how God was working through it on behalf of the church. Just what had he endured? He gives us a list of his experiences elsewhere in:

2 Corinthians 11:23-28—“I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. 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. 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. 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. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.”

Despite all that he had faced for the sake of the gospel, there is not a hint of self-pity in his words, no ‘woe-is-me’ mentality. Instead, Paul says, “I will rejoice in all of this!” Paul rejoiced in his sufferings because he sees them as being rich with purpose, which is why he will make this statement in verse 24, “And in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of His body, the church.” He’s not suggesting that something was missing in the suffering and

death of Christ, and he somehow had to add to that. That is not what this means. When Jesus died on the cross, He said, “It is finished!” Nothing more can be done, and nothing was left undone for redemption. Paul viewed his own trials as sharing in Christ’s afflictions. His number one desire was:

Philippians 3:10—“That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death.”

In other words, his suffering identified him with Jesus and displayed the reality that following Christ involves carrying a cross. It was not redemptive, but was representative.

John Piper—*“Paul’s sufferings fill up Christ’s afflictions not by adding anything to their worth, but by extending them to the people they were meant to save. God really means for the body of Christ, the church, to experience some of the suffering He experienced so that when we proclaim the cross as the way to life, people will see the marks of the cross in us and feel the love of the cross from us.”*

Paul was in prison because of his labors for Christ and the church, since he refused to cease preaching the gospel. It is why he could rejoice despite suffering because he knew that it was productive for the mission. He explains in:

Philippians 1:12-13—“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”

And so when he says, “You know what has happened to me,” Paul is referring to the issue of his own imprisonment in Rome, the same imprisonment from which

he now writes to the Colossians. He had been kept in prison for two years in Caesarea without trial. From there, he was taken to Rome after having appealed to Caesar. By the time he finally got there, he had survived a storm at sea, had been deserted by most of his friends, and had been slandered by his opponents. He was now facing potential execution for his faith. So he knew what it meant to face affliction in life. “You know the things that have happened to me.”

I imagine that we all can identify with that statement one way or another. We all have our own story about those things which have happened to us in life, issues we have faced, circumstances we’ve come up against. Paul says, “Me too.” And yet it is almost as if he dismisses all of that as he gives it only a passing mention. And he can rejoice in his suffering. The reason is due to the fact that he’s not primarily concerned with the stuff he’s faced, but the way God has been glorified through the midst of it all. It was all about Jesus, not about him.

True gospel ministry involves willing sacrifice—embracing difficulty for the salvation and spiritual growth of others. It isn’t about our comfort. Christianity is all about a Savior who willingly laid down His life for us. Redemptively, there was a cross for Jesus that He alone could bear for the sake of our salvation. And now representatively, there is also a cross for each one of us for the sake of making Christ known. If people are going to be won through our ministry, it will only be so through a life of continual self-sacrifice as we are willing to lay down our lives for the gospel. That’s what Paul says here. But then notice a second thing:

2—STEWARDSHIP of the gospel mystery (1:25-27)

“Of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints. 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.”

Not only does Paul see his sufferings as an opportunity for the gospel, but notice how he considers it stewardship from God. He viewed himself as a ‘steward’ whom his Lord has entrusted with the responsibility of making God’s Word fully known. In fact, the phrase literally reads “that I might make complete the Word of God.” The idea is to lay it out in all of its fullness, while not shrinking back from preaching it in its entire message. People can’t know Jesus Christ better without knowing the Scriptures. Which is why preaching is at the center of what we do on Sunday. Not ranting and raving about what is going on in the world, and not providing folks with a pep talk or a feel good message, but preaching the Word of God in all of its fullness. The specifics of that message are laid out in verses 26-27.

His ministerial stewardship from God involved making the Word of God fully known, especially what he refers to as the ‘mystery’ of Christ among the Gentiles. The word is:

“Mystery” — *what was formerly hidden and now revealed*

There are some things that God reveals to no one, for the secret things belong to the Lord our God (Deut. 29:29). He reveals others things only to certain people, for the secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him (Ps. 25:14). And then other things were hidden in the Old Testament but are now revealed in the light of the New, which is what is meant by this term ‘mystery’ found in verses 26-27.

There may even be sort of a play on words here, for it was ‘secret knowledge’ that the false teachers in Colossae were claiming to offer. Paul is saying that the real ‘mystery’ has been revealed in Christ. The content of this message was

once kept in the hidden counsels of God, and waiting to be revealed at the right time. And with the coming of Christ, it has been made known to believers. So the content of this now revealed ‘mystery’ from God is this—“Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The life of Christ has now come to dwell in the believer, including both Jew and Gentile. There is no longer any distinction.

Charles Swindoll — *“God’s saving mercy, once openly proclaimed among the Jews through their prophets and in their Holy Scriptures, was now being proclaimed far and wide among Jews and Gentiles alike through the person and work of Jesus Christ! The Gentiles could now experience all the benefits of being children of God.”*

What does Paul mean when he says that Christ in you is ‘the hope of glory?’ It is the fact that those who are indwelt by Christ possess such a sureness of hope of the glory to come that we begin to experience it now. In other words, the inward presence of Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit grants assurance of salvation to a believer and a blessed hope of all the future glories that are awaiting us. It is what Fanny Crosby meant when she wrote:

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine;
O, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood!*

This is the story of all who’ve come to know Jesus Christ through faith. Consider what it also means with respect to our ongoing battle with sin. Though I’m still weighed down by temptation and failure, by faith I am able to see through my union with Christ this glorious victory that gives me the strength I need to fight temptation. The hope of glory recognizes that I have been forever freed from the

penalty of sin, I am being freed from the power of sin, and there is coming a day when I will be freed from the presence of sin entirely! Which is why we can be sure that this light and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison (2 Cor. 4:17). And so all of this serves as an incentive for us in present ministry, and to which subject Paul turns next. For him, gospel ministry also involved:

3—STRENUOUS labor for spiritual growth (1:28-29)

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me.”

The third thing we can say about Paul’s model of ministry involves his objective. Notice he says, “Him we proclaim!” He made it his number one aim to proclaim Christ. After those monumental statements made about Him in verses 15-23, and since the gospel mystery is ‘Christ in you’, the hope of glory, it should stand to reason that Paul now says, “Him, Christ, He’s the One we proclaim!” To ‘proclaim’ is to publicly declare the truth, to announce that which had been accomplished.

Richard Phillips — *“To preach Jesus is to announce the virgin birth by which the eternal Son of God took up a true human nature. We preach the spotless life of the Lamb of God, fulfilling God’s law on our behalf. We proclaim the atoning death of Jesus as the sole basis for the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of Christ as the open door to new and saving life. We preach the ascension of Christ and His present reign in heaven by which Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to bring sinners to faith. And we proclaim that this present world will crash down in*

His glorious second coming, prompting the final judgment of all people and their subsequent eternity either in heaven or in hell.”

Like a coin with two sides, notice how it involves a negative side and a positive side. Negatively, it includes warning or admonishing. It is confronting people in their sin and need. Positively, it includes teaching or instructing them in Christ.

Vines Expository Dictionary — *“The difference between ‘admonish’ and ‘teach’ seems to be that, whereas the former has mainly in view the things that are wrong and call for warning, the latter has to do chiefly with the impartation of positive truth.”*

While the first word involves ‘warning’ people about what not to believe, ‘teaching’ instructs them in how to think and live as followers of Christ. Both of these are necessary. For without one or the other, a ministry will be out of biblical balance. Someone says, “Which is more important?” That is like asking which wing on an airplane is more important! Both are needed. If our ministry was nothing but warning, you’d never know what was right. And if it was nothing but teaching, you’d never know what was wrong. So both the negative as well as the positive are essential for a well-rounded ministry. Him we preach, warning everyone and teaching everyone, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Notice the word ‘everyone.’ That is important because, unlike the false teachers of Colossae who held out ‘perfection’ only to an initiated spiritual elite, Paul sets forth Christ as the Savior for every man and woman, boy and girl. Paul looks on every person, without distinction, as someone who needs to hear about Jesus.

The language in verse 28 is in the emphatic—everyone, everyone, everyone. The rich, the poor, the black, the white, the moral and the immoral, there is no

distinction. Paul made it his objective to preach the gospel of Christ to everyone, to fully declare the ‘whole counsel’ of God to everyone, warning everyone and teaching everyone, and here’s his purpose—that we may present everyone mature in Christ. And that ‘everyone’ includes me and you.

Paul’s goal was to present every believer mature in Christ. The word means ‘complete’ and refers to the result of on-going spiritual growth in the life of a Christian through the consistent application of God’s Word. A healthy ministry is one in which God’s people are growing more and more like Christ. It is reaching people, teaching people. So that they are saved and sanctified. That’s the Great Commission, it is what it means to make disciples.

What is the goal of our ministry here at Hopewell? Is it to simply have worship services? Is it to promote events? Is it to have a great kids ministry, student ministry, and to keep the calendar filled with activity? All of those are wonderful things. However, the goal is leading people to follow Christ through worship, discipleship, and ministry. It is the multiplication and maturity of disciples, who then will be able to reproduce their faith in other people.

Kent Hughes —*“[Paul’s] joy was to present to Christ believers who have reached their maximum earthly potential.”*

Notice he says in verse 29, “For this I toil, struggling.” No ministry is effective without hard work, a deep and exacting commitment. We get the word ‘agony’ from this. Paul here is describing the kind of work that left a person so tired that it was as if he had taken a beating. Sloth is an enemy of a great ministry. And so we toil and labor, but notice he says, “I am struggling with His energy that He powerfully works within me.” In other words, Paul says he is giving it all that he has, while also entirely depending upon the Holy Spirit. It is grace-driven, Spirit-

dependent effort. For all his zeal, he wasn't relying on his own efforts. For all his study, he wasn't relying on his own intellectual ability. For all his words, he didn't rely on his eloquence or speaking ability or persuasiveness. He knew he was empowered by the Spirit as the power of Christ was at work in and through him.

1 Corinthians 15:10—“I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

Ministry is not simply an activity, but is a Spirit-empowered labor which is aimed at bringing other people to Christ and helping them grow to maturity in Christ. Paul says, “I toiled and labored at this, but with all of Christ's energy that He powerfully works within me” (δύναμις). It is the very same word used to describe the gospel in Romans 1:16, which is the ‘power’ of God to salvation. Gospel ministry demands an empowered messenger who boldly proclaims a powerful message!

Hebrews 4:12—“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

Let me leave you with some closing thoughts for those in the ministry, both vocationally and voluntary, because all of us are in the ministry. How is ministry an experience with suffering? I thought about how there are times when:

- You will be misunderstood and criticized
- You will be opposed
- You will experience intense loneliness
- You will be ostracized

- You will constantly see little to no immediate results for intense labors
- You will be attacked spiritually

And yet at the same time, it is the most joyful enterprise you can imagine. For instance:

- You will have deep, life-long friendships
- You will see lives changed
- You will grow in your knowledge of God
- You will have every need met
- You will be respected by those who look up to you
- You will be a presence in the most important moments of another person's life
- You will one day hear Jesus say, "Well done!"

Paul's sacrificial service, gospel stewardship, and Spirit-empowered striving all find their source in the very thing we remember in the Lord's Supper. Observing the table calls us not only to look back to the cross of Jesus, but also to embrace Paul's Christ-centered pattern of ministry until He comes. Just as the Christian life is a crucified life, so also is Christian ministry all about the cross. We're to lay down our lives for the spread of the gospel. We've not been called to a life of ease and comfort. Ministry involves joyfully enduring our hardships, faithfully proclaiming the gospel, while powerfully depending upon Christ. So don't quit. Don't give in to despair. Don't think that your efforts do not matter. Because they do. All that is done in Jesus' name and for His glory will one day receive His reward. The Bible says in:

Psalm 126:6—“He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”

Isaiah 55:11 — “So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

Maxie Dunnam told the story of how many years ago, there was a woman in Africa who became a Christian. And being filled with gratitude, she decided to do something for Christ. She was blind, uneducated, and 70 years old. She came to her missionary with her French Bible and asked her to underline John 3:16 in red ink. Mystified, the missionary watched her as she took her Bible and sat in front of a boys' school in the afternoon. When school dismissed, she would call a boy or two and ask them if they knew French. When they proudly responded 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 she would tell them about Christ. The missionary said that over the years, she led countless numbers to Christ—and 24 young men became pastors due to her work.

Friends, that is just a sample of what God can and will do when we embrace the same model of ministry that Paul describes here in these verses.