

Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

"... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything"(Colossians 1:18).

Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians The Primacy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1-29) The Gospel and the Church 1:24-27 (Part 1)

24 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. 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, 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.

I would like to begin this morning by reading for you a small portion of the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 20:20-28 we have the account of the mother of James and John making a most bold request of Jesus, a request that her sons be given some of the grandest seats of authority in the coming kingdom of Jesus. What I would have you note as I read this text, is how Jesus turned this request for great sovereignty into a call to these men to great servanthood.

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Jesus with her sons, bowing down and making a request of Him. 21 And He said to her, "What do you wish?" She said to Him, "Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit one on Your right and one on Your left." 22 But Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to Him, "We are able." 23 He said to them, "My cup you shall drink; but to sit on My right and on My left, this is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by My Father." 24 And hearing this, the ten became indignant with the two brothers. 25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26 "It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

True greatness in God's eyes is not found in positions of power, but rather in position of service. If we want to be great in God's kingdom, then the lesson from this episode in the life of Jesus is clear, learn to be the servant of all.

As we come to the next set of verses in our study in Colossians, we find Paul making another transition. He had been speaking about the primacy and supremacy of Christ and now we see him speaking about himself, about his own ministry. Why is Paul doing this? Paul speaks of his own ministry because he wants to demonstrate to the Colossians his authority to speak about and for God in contrast to the false teachers they had been hearing. Paul wants them to know his own call from God and the gifts he has been given to speak to them of the only way a person can be made complete or mature in Christ and that is through the faithful preaching and practicing of God's Word as it comes from the apostles like Paul, John and the others who composed our New Testament.

But even as Paul speaks of his authority in these verses, notice that he does not lord it over the Colossians, but rather appeals to them in verse 25 as a "minister" or more specifically, as a servant and as a steward of God. But what does Paul's defense of his authority to speak to the church concerning God have to do for us today? I believe that we have many lessons to draw

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from, but perhaps the most significant is simply this; how can we know if our lives are being truly affected by and for the gospel? How can we know that the gospel has and is changing us? How can we be sure that we are not just going through the motions, but are being effective for Christ and faithful to His message? Remember that this gospel is the news that because of the death of Christ on the cross, we have peace with God (1:21-23); this news that Christ is not only preeminent and supreme over all creation (1:15-17); but that He is also head over all the church (1:18-20)? I submit to you that in these words of Paul, we find both by example and by principle, the evidences of the gospel at work. It was by these evidences that Paul himself knew God as at work in him; that he had been transformed by and was being effective with the gospel. And I say that the same evidences may be our own and that by these we may know that the power of the gospel is at work in us. And so, we can know that we have embraced this gospel when we respond to the church, the company of those whom God has redeemed, with the same principles and motivations for the church as that of Paul in our text.

I have a great love and concern for the church, both universally and most especially locally. It is the church for whom Christ died and is going to present as spotless and blameless. It is the body of Christ through whom Christ reveals Himself to both His own and to the world. The church that is God's household and is the pillar and support of the truth according 1 Timothy 3:15. Let us beware not to neglect, or show any semblance of indifference to the church, who is the bride of Christ. To this end then, over the next couple of weeks, I wish us to consider three evidences of Paul's concern for the church, a concern that is borne out of his sincere love of the gospel and the Person revealed in the gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ. So, from Colossians 1:24-27, we know that we have been affected by the gospel when we...

- I. Willingly suffer for the church (1:24)
- II. Determinedly spend ourselves for the church (1:25)
- III. Humbly see the Strength of the church (1:26-27)

This morning we are going to focus on verse 24 and what it means to willingly suffer for the church. I wish us to see how this was true in Paul's life and then examine how these things ought to be true for each believer in Jesus Christ.

I. Willingly suffer for the church? (1:24)

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.

Our text begins with the words, "**Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake...**" Paul speaks of sufferings, literally hardships or pain, be it physical or emotional. Paul tells us that he was at that moment currently suffering, "**in my flesh**" – physical and emotional suffering, but notice as well that he two times states that his sufferings had a purpose, they were "**for your sake**" and "**on behalf of His [Christ] body, which is the church...**" Paul was suffering for the sake of and on behalf of church. But what was Paul suffering?

When it came to suffering, that is physical suffering, Paul was no stranger. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 we have a very detailed accounting of the many sufferings experienced by Paul and these as a result of his faith in Christ and concern for the church. Consider this, particularly if it could be said of you.

23 Are they servants of Christ? — I speak as if insane — I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. 24 Five times I

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received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. 26 I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; 27 I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

28 Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. 29 Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? 30 If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, 33 and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.

Paul indeed suffered in his flesh as we can see. But how could Paul say it was for the sake of and on behalf of the church? Even in the context of Colossians, we know that Paul was suffering. He was in prison for his faith. How did this incarceration help the church? At very least it gave him the opportunity to write this letter to the Colossians, to encourage their faith, to correct any bad teaching or practices. In fact, we could say that Paul's sufferings are helping us even today as we read these principles and seek to practice them in order to glorify Christ. Let us never forget that Paul's sufferings made him more dependent upon God; humble; sympathetic and hopeful.

But let us note a couple more things about this suffering of Paul for the church. First, there is an interesting statement at the end of verse 24 where Paul says, "***in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.***" Is there something lacking in what Christ went through on the cross for our sins that Paul or any other believer needs to fill up or complete? Not at all. The idea here is not about the sufficiency of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Our previous verses confirm that Christ's work was complete and sufficient. But this statement could be translated this way, "*in filling up the tribulations that are in relation to Christ.*" Doesn't that make it easier to understand? The idea here is that there is to be an expectation that when the gospel is lived out, there will be tribulations or trials that follow, afflictions that relate to and are caused by our relationship to Christ. Is this not what Jesus taught? Consider:

Matthew 5:10-11

10 Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

John 15:18-19

18 If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

John 16:33

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.

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We read in 2 Timothy 3:12 the words, **"Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."** And in 1 Peter 4:12-13 we are warned;

12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.

Coming back to Colossians 1:24 and this **"filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."** we need to understand this; the more the gospel is lived out in our lives, the more we fulfill these expected tribulations that relate us to Christ. Paul suffered for the church, for the well-being and sake of the church. Paul suffered so that he could exhort the church, could teach the church, could comfort the church, and could benefit the church. How do you think he did? Very well? But let me ask you now, what are you willing to suffer for the sake of the church? Would you be willing to suffer as Paul? We have already seen that we are called to at least be prepared to suffer according to the verses we looked at.

The truth of the matter is we know very little about suffering for the cause of Christ or for the sake of the church. I know very well about suffering for my own stupidity? I know very well about being laid up with a sickness for weeks at a time; but can you and I relate to the suffering of Paul for the church?

Let me say that I am grateful that the Lord has given to us such a time of prosperity and peace as most of us have experienced in our Christian lives. But I do fear that we let our ease lull us into useless complacency when it comes to knowing, serving and proclaiming Christ. We are more concerned about our personal comforts and conveniences than we are for Christ and His church. Where the church for Paul, the apostles and the early believers was primary and central, with people doing anything and everything they could to participate as often as possible, the church for many in our day is secondary and optional. Could it be said of us that we are more worried about watching our favorite TV shows or sports games; or getting to our desired destination of recreation; or of getting our little one's down for their appointed naps than we are for the sake and well being of the church. Do you suppose the Shekinah glory of God heeded the wants and whims of Israel in the desert? That once that visible manifestation of God moved that either God or the elders of Israel would entertain notions like, "We need to finish our game first" or "We have not finished decorating our tent so we will be along after a while" or "I just put the children down for a nap"? Beloved, where God moved, the people moved, sometimes at in opportune and inconvenient times. And here we find Paul of whom it could be said, was constantly inconvenienced. Yet Paul willingly suffered for the church. And so I ask you, what are you willing to suffer for the church?

Of course physical and emotional suffering may be limited for some, but wherever the gospel is affecting you thoroughly, there will be suffering. I know that I have family and friends that still ask me, "Why do you spend so much time concerning yourself about the church?" I could take it as a compliment. I could say, well, "I'm a preacher and preachers concern themselves with the church." But their point is that in comparison to most people's job, both for my family and myself, we are all about the church. My family and I are willing to put up with the ridicule and the scoffing that comes with out involvement with the church. Very light suffering indeed but it is a kind of suffering.

Do you know that there are some members of the church here that put such a priority on the church, that they plan their time off, their vacations, their family events around the church?

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And what do they say to that family member who says, "Why can't you hang around on Sunday, what's more important than family or this vacation?" Their response is in effect, "I have a responsibility to my church. It is my desire, my longing to be with my church." I am not saying that no one should ever miss a Sunday or an opportunity at a mid-week study. There will be times when it is more important to be somewhere else. And sometimes that somewhere else may make it impossible to be with your church family. But let me ask you this in all candor and with every desire to have you answer this in your own heart, "What are you willing to suffer for the sake of the church?" Do you realize that as a member of the body of Christ, you have something to contribute to the fellowship and worship here and that your absence not only robs the congregation of the fullness of God's blessing, but it also robs you of blessings. If Paul had not been inconvenienced and imprisoned, we would not have been blessed with this letter we are studying. But what if Paul had said, "This is not good timing, I'm going to pull back or pull out?" We would have been robbed the blessing of this letter. In Malachi 3:8-10, we have God speaking to the nation of Israel who was not participating with God the way God intended by failing to bring the law-appointed tithes and offerings. Let's read this:

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows."

This is not a message about giving tithes and offerings to the church, but the principle of giving is the same, only rather than simply your offerings of substance, God calls you to the body of Christ. Hear now Romans 12:1, which begins with those familiar words,

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

Is this a personal, individual concern, or is this a pursuit of the body of Christ, the church? We can say both, but it is not to be one without the other. The rest of the context of Romans 12 is not simply about one's personal responsibilities alone to Christ, but rather their own involvement with the rest of the body of Christ, the church. Paul goes on to say in Romans 12:4-5

4 For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

And then he lists activity after activity that can only be accomplished as we willingly present ourselves as living sacrifices, dying to self, not caring what others outside the church think or say, but giving ourselves to the service of God's people knowing that as we serve one another we are serving Christ. How is it that Jesus said it in Matthew 25:40? Did He not say, **"Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it [acts of service] to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me."**

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But there is one more thing to note about what Paul says about his suffering for the church and it is actually the first thing to which he draws his reader's attention. This suffering for the church was done how? With a martyrs complex? With a sour face? With moaning and groaning? No, but with rejoicing. With great joy and enthusiasm. Paul rejoiced because he believed in the providence of God; that any physical suffering he underwent for the gospel; that any imprisonment for the cause of Christ or any antagonism he endured would be used of God to accomplish even greater purposes of God. Do you believe that? That even your sufferings are a cause of a greater purpose to the glory of God, if you indeed suffer as a Christian.

Now perhaps at this point you are feeling a bit guilty; or a bit overwhelmed. Maybe you are justifying in your mind, "Well, that was the apostle Paul's ministry and he was special?" Was Paul "special"? Actually Paul stated in Ephesians 3:8 by the moving of the Holy Spirit of God within him that he was the very least of the saints. None of us here had the specific calling of God that Paul did to be an apostle. And there are only a few of us here that have the more specific calling of God to hold the office of "pastor" or "teacher" and to proclaim the Word of God via the pulpit. But in 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul did say to every believer by the Holy Spirit, "**Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.**" Did Christ suffer for the church? Yes. Did Paul suffer for the church? Yes. What are you suffering for the church? What do you need to give up, give over, turn off, turn on, repent of, turn toward or just otherwise change in your thinking?

I am not trying to be the heavy here. I do not want anyone to leave here with a guilt trip. Paul had nothing but rejoicing when he thought about all he went through for the sake of the church. How could he have such a joy? May I suggest because he gave up on lesser things and counted them as rubbish? What needs to go, just one thing, that keeps you from being faithful to gathering of the saints; that hinders you from joining with others for a bible study, a time of prayer or even to purposely to go out and share the gospel? Write it down! Confess it! Ask the Lord to remove it! Purpose to remove any obstacle that would hinder you from increasing in your participation with the church. Let us be admonished by the hymn that calls out:

Rise up, O men of God!
Have done with lesser things.
Give heart and mind and soul and strength
To serve the King of kings.

Rise up, O men of God!
The church for you doth wait,
Her strength unequal to her task;
Rise up and make her great!

Could it be that we have been too complacent; too lackadaisical, too flippant; too concerned about our own schedules; about our own jobs, about our own friends that we have failed to be as concerned about the only organization that Christ ordained to carry forth His work and message, that is the church?

Let us be careful as we live in a time that tends to focus so much on a person's "personal" relationship with God. We must not forget that every genuine believer has been saved and placed into the Body of Christ, the church. And let me go way out on a limb here as I suggest to you that service to Christ in a local assembly is every believer's primary obligation in life. I am not dismissing the fact that we have other responsibilities given to us by God, but it is my understanding of the Word of God that the body of Christ is given the place of priority in believers'

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lives and therefore we should be willing to suffer and be spent for her even as Paul was. How can I say this? Consider with me just a couple of many biblical reasons for saying that the church is every believer’s primary obligation in life.

First, according to Ephesians 2:8-10, 4:7; 12-16, God saves and gifts believers for the purpose of “good works,” – God glorifying activities and actions. These good works are accomplished in the context of the church. We often think of “good works” as being only an individual responsibility, but the context of Ephesians 4 will not allow this. The context and purpose of our service is within and for the Body of Christ.

Second, I would have you remember that a vital relationship to a local church is essential to properly fulfilling all other God-given responsibilities. For example, consider child rearing. The over-arching theme of the letter to the Ephesians is the Church, the Body of Christ. And the call to bring up children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord in 6:4 cannot be done rightly apart from the local body. Children’s spiritual growth depends on a proper relationship to the ministry of the local body (Eph 4:12-16). The goal of bringing our children to spiritual maturity is undermined if we have attitudes of neglect or indifference to the local body (Hebrews 10:25).

Both our employment and our witness are tied to our relationship to the church. Our work is secondary to our walk with God according to Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:23. And even the exhortations to be witnesses for Christ are in the context of our connection to a local body (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; Titus 2:9-10). It is in a local body that are taught the Word, and built up in our faith by our mutual ministry to one another. It is in the context of the church that we are called to enjoy the purifying effects of worship and service. In short, our witness for Christ is limited and incomplete when we are disconnected from the Body of Christ.

There is much more that could be said and will be said next time, but the point is to challenge our thinking concerning the priority of the church. Do not think I am asking anyone to neglect our other God-given responsibilities, but I am asking you this, what are you willingly and joyfully suffering for the sake of the church? Can you name anything? For only as we are seeking to be servants, ministers in the church of Christ will we begin to experience a right focus for all our other responsibilities.

If we want to be great in God’s service, we must learn to be the servants of all, and our service begins with the household of God, the body of Christ, the church. Let us prayerfully consider how we can be more engaged with the body of Christ for the glory of God, the well-being of the church and as a witness to the world.

Soli Deo Gloria

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