

Filling Up What Is Lacking in Christ's Afflictions: Pauline Understanding of Suffering in Colossians 1:24--2:5

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Abstract

The theme of suffering is well-grounded in the Bible. Paul refers to suffering concerning Christian ministry in Colossians 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.” This study aims to determine the exegetical and theological issues of this verse within its context (Col 1:24–2:5). This is done through an exegesis of Colossians 1:24–2:5. The study concludes that the phrase “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions...” has nothing to do with his death as an atoning sacrifice for sin but more about the afflictions that Paul and the rest of the body of Christ will bear for the sake of Christ in the cause of bearing witness for him. This study has also found that nowhere else in the Pauline corpus is the word affliction used regarding Christ. Rather, it is always about Paul. This study has also found out that παθήματα and θλίψις (afflictions and sufferings) are synonymously used.

Keywords: Christ’s Suffering; Christian Ministry; Pauline Theology;

Introduction

Colossians 1:24–2:5 reveals the apostle Paul’s struggles to work out the stewardship he received from God (1:25) to make the word of God fully known. Indeed, the pericope has words closely related to suffering (afflictions, toil, struggling, and great struggle) to underline the critical importance of the concept in Christian witness. Leppä makes an important point regarding the use of the terms τὰ παθήματα and θλίψις (suffering and affliction) in Pauline corpus. He argues that θλίψις in the rest of the Pauline corpus is regarding the afflictions of Paul but not Christ. When referring to Christ’s afflictions, he uses the phrase τὰ παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ (2 Cor 1:5, Phil 3:10). He argues that the writer of Colossians is a later writer who uses the noun θλίψις differently from the genuine letters to protect his uniqueness after



the death of Paul.¹ Patzia corroborates Leppä by saying that θλίψις “affliction” has not been used anywhere else in the NT about the atoning death of Christ.² Suffering for the sake of Christ has indeed characterized the church of Christ from the times of the apostles to the present times. The apostles of Christ often addressed the issue of suffering to firm the believers’ faith (1 Pet: 1--7; 4:12--15 Jas 1: 1--4, Acts 14:22).

Background Information

The letter names Paul as its author (1:1 4:18). Peter O’Brien makes the point that Colossians was a genuine composition of Paul, or at least at his dictation, and sent out in his name.³ He further argues that the tradition that Colossians is a genuine Pauline letter stands on good ground because the later church fathers accepted it.⁴ Wall agrees with Kummel in his support of Paul’s authorship of Colossians by stating that “on the basis of language and style, there is no reason to doubt the Pauline authorship of the letter.”⁵ However, the author’s clarity isn’t apparent to everyone. In Wall’s words, since the beginning of the “modern period of biblical scholarship and the rise of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion.’” Paul’s authorship of Colossians has been challenged on literary and theological grounds.”⁶ Among the reasons for rejecting Paul’s authorship is that Colossians shows a more mature theological perspective than Paul’s genuine letters and uses a different vocabulary.⁷ Dunn remarks that there is a strong likelihood that the letter comes from a hand other than Paul’s because the letter has features characteristic of the flow of thought and rhetoric technique markedly different from those of the undisputed Paulines.⁸ Porkony, too, in support of the deutropauline authorship of Colossians argues that “a post Pauline origin is favored by the fact that Col 1:6 and 23 stress the worldwide spreading of the Gospel, and the practice of reading of the apostolic letters in the community is presupposed (4:16).”⁹ Outi Leppä in support of another writer of Colossians

¹ Leppä Outi *The Making of Colossians* (Helsinki Vandenhoeck; The Finnish Exegetical Society 2003)105.

² Patzia Arthur G. *Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon* New International Biblical Commentary (Massachusetts; Hendrickson publishers 1990), 40.

³ Peter T. O’Brien. *Word Biblical Commentary Colossians, Philemon* (Word Book, Publishers Waco, Texas 1982), xli.

⁴ O’Brien, *Biblical Commentary Colossians, Philemon*, xli.

⁵ Robert W. Wall, *Colossians & Philemon* (Downers Grove, Illinois, USA Leicester, England 1993), 18.

⁶ Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, 15.

⁷ Wall, *Colossians & Philemon* 15.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids Michigan 1996), 35.

⁹ Petr Porkony *Colossians* (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts 01961-3473 1993), 13.



other than Paul contends that “it seems unlikely that during Paul’s lifetime, some of his disciples would have written a letter which put forth a theology which diverges so much from Paul.”¹⁰ He accordingly reasons that the differences between Colossians and the Pauline corpus can be explained by assuming that Col is pseudonymous and was written by a later author.¹¹ However, there is an abundance of similarity between Colossians and the undisputed Pauline corpus, and these point to Paul as the author.¹²

Colossae was an important city in the fertile valley forged by the river Lycus in southern Phrygia.¹³ Together with Hierapolis and Laodicea, they contributed to the valley’s booming wool and textile business. Colossae was particularly advantaged because of its strategic placement on a major trade route. However, the city failed to renew itself and was overtaken in importance by both Hierapolis and Laodicea.¹⁴

The circumstances that seem to have prompted the writing of Colossians are the heresy of chapter two. The heresy’s precise nature is unclear, with some viewing it as the seeds from which the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century grew.¹⁵ Others view it bordering on Judaism for the many distinctively Jewish elements to the false teaching: Sabbath observance, Jewish festivals, and an interest in angels 2:16-18.¹⁶

Literary Context

Colossians fits in the category of books by Paul, referred to as prison letters. Internal evidence shows that Paul did not directly plant this church (1:4, 7, 4:12-13), but rather Epaphras, who might have responded to the Gospel proclamation by Paul during the three-year ministry at Ephesus. Paul wrote to this church to refute heretical teachings that had threatened her existence. It seems that the heretical teachings were encouraging the practice of other things outside the gospel and faith in Christ, hence bordering on Judaism and gnostic asceticism (2:16-23).

¹⁰ Outi Leppa, *The making of Colossians* (The Finish Exegetical society in Helsinki Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht in Gottingen 2003), 11.

¹¹ Leppa, *The making of Colossians*, 11.

¹² ESV. The argument about style is much weaker since there is in fact strong continuity of style between this letter and his other letters. It is also quite precarious to make a judgment about authorship based on such a small sampling of letters. It is inappropriate to expect an author to demonstrate stylistic uniformity throughout all his works.

¹³ Wall, *Colossians and Philemon*, 20.

¹⁴ John F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), Col.1

¹⁵ Walvoord, Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

¹⁶ ESV Col.



Because of the above threat and the urgency of the matter, Paul reveals the content of their prayers for the Colossians, which is that God would fill them with the knowledge of his will (1:9). This knowledge, spiritual wisdom, and understanding will be the true guardrails against delusion from plausible arguments (2:4).

For the same reason, Paul also asserts Christ's preeminence (1:15-23). He delineates this by underlining Christ's role in the entire universe and in relation to the church. Lightfoot is precise in his remark that Paul defines the person of Christ, claiming for him absolute supremacy.¹⁷ He has supremacy over both the universe which is the natural creation (1:15-17), and the church, which is his new moral creation (1:18).¹⁸ Wall corroborates Lightfoot's view by stating that verses 15-20 "celebrate Christ's current and cosmic lordship over God's creation and new creation, and show why we can be confident, even in the midst of a broken and fallen world, that the lord Christ continues to mediate the blessing of God's reconciling grace within the life of the new creation, the church."¹⁹ The fact of Christ's supremacy and the security of Colossians in him would logically lead to the argument of 2:6-23 where Paul strongly admonishes them to see to it that no one takes them captive by philosophy and empty deceit (2:8). He clinches the argument by stating: If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations-- (Col. 2:20).

Exegesis of Colossians

The Suffering of the Minister (v24)

Greek Text: Νῦν χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκκλησία²⁰

Translation: Now I rejoice in my sufferings on behalf of you and I fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body, which is the church.²¹

This verse poses significant exegetical and theological challenges.²² In what sense could Christ's afflictions be said to be lacking? If Christ's afflictions are lacking something

¹⁷ J. B Lightfoot. *St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing house 1979), 143.

¹⁸ Lightfoot, *Colossians and Philemon*, 143.

¹⁹ Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, 82.

²⁰ The Greek translation used throughout this study is GNT NA28.

²¹ The translation of Colossians 1:24-2:5 is the author's translation.

²² O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 75.



that Paul could supply, this will offend and contradict the rest of the scripture in its witness that the death of Christ has reconciled man back to God (Col 2:13–15, Rom 4:25, Eph 2:11–18, Heb 1:3). Then in what way is Paul’s sufferings filling up what’s lacking in Christ’s afflictions? What are Christ’s afflictions referred to here, and in what sense does Paul’s sufferings “fill up” their lack? Was Christ’s work lacking in any way and how would an individual be called upon to provide what was lacking?

White believes that the two halves of verse 24 have a parallel structure, as seen below.²³

24a. Νῦν χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν

24b. καὶ ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων....ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ

Both halves have a main verb in the first-person present active indicative. This is followed by the prepositional phrase ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν in 24a and the direct object τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων.²⁴

A close analysis of the use of παθήμασιν and θλίψεων in 2Cor 1:4–7 shows they are interchangeably used and therefore synonymous. The two halves above have the preposition ὑπὲρ in the genitive, serving to identify the persons on whose behalf the action of the verb is done. The beneficiaries of ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν “for you” in 24a and 24b are the Colossians and his body, respectively. White further remarks that the semantic value of this parallel arrangement of the verse equates the two groups mentioned in the ὑπὲρ clauses, hence “you” (Colossians) in this context equals “his body” (the church).²⁵ This arrangement may impart an explicative nuance to the second half in reference to the first.²⁶

Paul starts with an adverb Νῦν “now” which could be seen as transitional and therefore can be put; “now then.” It could also be temporal, referring to Paul’s present imprisonment and suffering. However, it’s more fitting to see it as transitional over temporal because Paul’s prison reality isn’t directly mentioned in this letter until 4:3. Whereas the entire last half of 23 is transitional, διάκονος carries the greater burden. It could thus be put “now then,” (in light of what he had become, a minister of the Gospel), in which case it

²³ Joel White, “Paul completes the servant’s sufferings”, *Journal for the study of Paul and his letters*, 6.2, 181–198

²⁴ White, “Paul completes the servant’s sufferings” 185.

²⁵ White, “Paul completes the servant’s sufferings” 185.

²⁶ White, “Paul completes the servant’s sufferings” 185



would be as a transitional particle that would facilitate movement from one topic to another: from Christ to the minister.

The term Χαίρω is a verb in the descriptive present case. He paints a picture of what he is doing at present. He is rejoicing at present, regardless of the prevailing circumstances. Furthermore, his suffering is for the benefit of the Colossians and the benefit of the body of Christ, hence serving as an incentive for the experience. Suffering and joy are so connected in the NT that those suffering are often called to count it all joy for the opportunity (Jas. 1:2–4, 1 Pet.1:7).). Some of these benefits are in taking the gospel to Gentiles which fits in very well with Paul’s understanding that he was an apostle to the Gentiles (2:7—8, Rom 11:13). There could be an echo of Christ’s words after the Damascus road encounter to the effect that Paul as his chosen instrument will suffer for his sake as he carries his name to Kings and Gentiles (Acts 9:15—16. To express this, ὑπὲρ is used as a preposition with the genitive of advantage²⁷ in the two cases (for the Colossians and the church) to mean his suffering confers a benefit. This expression may be used in the sense of “Jewish concepts of the vicarious significance of the death of martyrs and the just.”²⁸ This resonates with the Hellenistic cultural milieu where “the heroic sufferings of great leaders at the hands of outsiders was thought to vindicate their integrity, and also the value of their teaching for the community”.²⁹ The function of 1:24-2:5 is to support Paul’s role and thereby establish the apostle’s authority for what will follow in subsequent thought units as he combats the heresy at Colossae (2:6-23 and 3:1-4:6).³⁰

The word ἐν a preposition used with the dative of place (sphere) noun. It denotes the sphere within which rejoicing takes place: in “suffering.” Wall’s remark on the relationship between Paul’s sufferings and his calling is precise and sheds more light on the twin issues: in the biblical tradition, the two belong together. Like Christ and the prophets of God before him, Paul is a “suffering servant.” Against the biblical background and the memory of Jesus,

²⁷ Daniel B Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*(Grand Rapids Michigan 49630 Zondervan Publishing House 1996) 383.

²⁸Harad, Riesenfeld, “Υπὲρ” TDNT 8:507-516.

²⁹ Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, 1993, 87.

³⁰ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians*, Commentaries on the New Testament(Grand Rapids Michigan. 2007) 86.



Paul interprets his suffering as the cost of his servanthood and provides evidence of his devotion to God's call.³¹

Moreover, as Spivey argues, Paul's sufferings may be considered didactic because they provide the "Colossians with an example of obedience to the gospel by showing what it means to live a cruciform life and be a cruciform people."³² By going through these sufferings and being steadfast in the faith, Spivey rightly expresses that Paul is living out his calling without shame, thus leaving an example for the Colossians. He further notes that "knowledge of Paul's sufferings, coupled with the awareness that the apostle endured such things "for the sake of the body of Christ," is intended to call the Colossian believers to a similar faithful obedience."³³

The verb ἀνταναπληρῶ in Col 1:24 is unique in early Christian literature,³⁴ and it is only found in 1:24. It is a composite verb that consists of a double prefix ἀντί + ἀνά and the verbal stem πληρῶ. Ἀναπληρῶ, which combines with ἀντί to form ἀνταναπληρῶ, is found in NT in its various forms (1 Cor.16:17-18, Phil 2:30). The use of Ἀναπληρῶ in this verses is in the sense of taking the place of another in meeting a need.

Its usage in Colossians 1:24 means that Paul is filling up within the context of the church and as a member of the body. These afflictions unavoidably must come in bearing witness for Christ and in the proclamation of the gospel. He is suffering for the sake of Christ. In his suffering and afflictions, the expected afflictions accompanying the proclamation of the gospel and the living out of his faith in Christ are experienced in him. In that way, the afflictions that must accompany the preaching of the gospel are borne, and thus, the lack is met. It does not mean that Paul will meet the lack once and for all. As long as the church continues to bear witness for Christ, the afflictions will remain and will continue to be met by others.

The phrase τὰ ὑστερήματα is very significant in this pericope, especially concerning the afflictions of Christ. It is used as a noun in the accusative of the direct object of the verb ἀνταναπληρῶ "to fill up." The commonest use of ὑστερέω in the NT is "to have a lack."³⁵ In

³¹ Wall, *Colossians & Philemon*, 1993, 86.

³² Stephen W Spivey, "Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care," *Institute of Spiritual Formation. Biola University, 1939-7909* Vol. 4, no. No.1 (2011): 43–62.

³³ Spivey, "Journal of Spiritual Formation & Spiritual Care," 43

³⁴ Leppä, *The Making of Colossians*, 104.

³⁵ Leppä, *The making of Colossians*, 104.



Colossians 1: 24, what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ that Paul, as a minister of both the gospel and of the church, will fill are the trials and tribulations accompanying the preaching of the gospel (2Cor 1:4-7). Christ also promised that these are bound to come (John 15 20, 16:33). They are lacking in the sense that they are the expected persecutions and tribulations that must accompany the preaching of the Gospel and in bearing witness for Christ. Paul encounters them for the sake of Christ, and so is the rest of the body. Paul says these must happen (1 Thess. 3:1-7).

The terms θλίψεων and παθήμασιν are very similar and are interchangeably used especially in 2 Cor 1:1-10. In the above text, Paul points out that θλίψει ἡμῶν “our affliction” are παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ “Christ’s sufferings” (2 Cor. 1:5). It is noteworthy, as Patzia points out that the term θλίψεων “afflictions” has not been used anywhere else in the NT about the atoning death of Christ.³⁶ Therefore, this would possibly mean that the phrase “τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ” “in Col. 1:24 and the phrase “τὰ παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ” in 2 Cor. 1:5 refer to the same experience and therefore θλίψις and παθήμασιν are synonymous.

There is a plethora of views as to the meaning of θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ “afflictions of Christ,” and this paper will concern itself with the most prevalent.

The first view is by O’Brien in his commentary on Colossians and Philemon. He says these are the same as the woes of the Messiah in the OT and the Jewish background of the apocalyptic conception of the end time.³⁷ In his view, the definite article in the phrase “the afflictions of Christ” suggests a definite or well-known entity, such as the birth pangs of the Messiah.³⁸ He further argues that the NT takes up these Jewish conceptions of the end-time woes but modifies them in the sense that the unknown figure in the Jewish conceptions is the Son of man, who is the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Some OT and NT texts he aligns support this view are Dan 12:1-10, Joel 3:1-15, Zeph 1:14-18, Matt 24:15-31, Rom 8:18-39, Acts 14:22, and 1 Thess. 3:3,7. According to this view, they are the travail out of which the messianic age is born, and God has set a limit to them, thus prescribing a definite measure for the afflictions the righteous and the martyrs must endure.³⁹ This would necessitate one to see them as partitive genitive. This view seems to have much biblical

³⁶ Patzia, Ephesians, *Colossians and Philemon*, 40.

³⁷ O’Brien Peter. *Colossians, Philemon* 78.

³⁸ O’Brien Peter. *Colossians, Philemon* 78.

³⁹ O’Brien Peter. *Colossians, Philemon* 78.



support, but seeing every affliction with eschatological lenses stretches it too far. Besides, the idea that the Church in the NT experiences the end-time woes of Israel in OT is simplistic.

The second view holds that Christ's vicarious death and suffering lack something, and Paul will supply the lack.⁴⁰ As O'Brien rightly remarks, this view is the least popular. It has been abandoned, for it offends the overwhelming witness of Scripture that Christ's death and resurrection is the ground on which humanity has been reconciled back to God. After Christ's humility to the extent of dying on the cross, the scriptures affirm that God has highly exalted him (Christ) and given him a name above every other name. This can only be so if the purpose for his coming and dying on the cross was successfully served. Reconciliation has been achieved by Christ's death for those who would believe in him (Rom. 5:10. 2 Cor. 5:18, Col.1:22, Gal. 3:13, Titus, 2:14). The witness of Paul in the above scriptures, coupled with the observation by many scholars that the phrase τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ is never used in the NT as a designation for the suffering of Jesus, thus making this view a very weak one. It borders on blasphemy to attribute such merit to a person's suffering. The thought that Paul's sufferings have redemptive value, like Christ's, is unbiblical.

Christ-mysticism is the third view, and it holds that all that Paul does and suffers happens in mystical union with Christ,⁴¹ an argument inspired by Gal. 2:20 and Phil 3:10. The "afflictions of Christ" are those sufferings that believers experience in mystical union with Christ.⁴² According to Pokorny, this view is held by those who consider Christ to be equivalent to the church as his mystical body and do take the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ as a subjective genitive.⁴³ The point in the "mystic union" argument is that the suffering of the church is taken as subsequent suffering of Christ for the reason that it happens "in Christ" (Acts 9:4). This mystical view argument is weak in that it fails to show how Paul can supply those mystical sufferings and why there would still be a lack in the first place if the mystical union is the right view. It's also unclear how those who hold this view would account for the attached benefit of suffering to the body. From Col. 1:24, it is clear that Paul's sufferings would be to the advantage of the body of Christ, but this mystical union view precludes that.

⁴⁰ O'Brien Peter T. *Colossians, Philemon* 77.

⁴¹ O'Brien Peter. *Colossians, Philemon*, 78.

⁴² O'Brien Peter. *Colossians, Philemon*, 78.

⁴³ Pokorny Petr *Colossians* 98.



The fourth view sees the completion of what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ (1:24) as essentially synonymous with making fully known the word of God (1:25).⁴⁴ According to this view, what is lacking is the appropriation of the already completed salvation and the afflictions of Christ represent the suffering linked with the apostolic proclamation.⁴⁵ However, this view fails to see the difference between the external afflictions that Paul might have had in mind (1 Thes.1:4-8) and the inner toils and struggles that Paul experienced in his application to making the word of God fully known (1:26-2:2). Secondly, this view does not define the limits of the apostolic proclamation. They fail to qualify how the proclamation of the Gospel to meet the lack is Apostolic and what is the place of Paul in it.

The fifth view is by Leppä, who argues that θλίψις in the rest of Pauline Corpus is regarding the afflictions of Paul but not Christ. When referring to Christ's afflictions, he uses the phrase τὰ παθήματα τοῦ Χριστοῦ (2 Cor. 1:5, Phil. 3:10). Because of the above, he argues that the writer of Colossians is a later writer who uses the noun θλίψις differently from the genuine letters to protect his uniqueness after the death of Paul.⁴⁶ David Hay also corroborates this proposition by arguing that the undisputed epistles of Paul contain suffering (Eph. 3:1,13; 4:1; 6:20; Phil. 3:8-11; 2 Cor. 1:3-11, 1 Thess. 1:6, Rom. 5:3) but not in the sense that they lack anything that would need to be supplied as in Col.1:24.⁴⁷ Therefore according to the above two authors, the presence of θλίψις in Colossians makes it a Pseudo-Pauline epistle. Leppä further advances his argument by saying that the death of Paul completes the afflictions of Christ, an interpretation which, in his view, Eph. 3:13 and Col 1:14 would seem to support.⁴⁸ In response to this view, this paper assumes that the Apostle Paul wrote Colossians. I observe that Leppä has made a firm conclusion on an issue of significant theological value premised on an assumption of Pseudo-Pauline authorship of the letter. A conclusion of such theological weight shouldn't be based on a verse or verses that aren't clear. Moreover, Leppä could also be reading too much into the texts of Eph. 3:13 and Col 1:14 to conclude that they speak of Paul's death.

⁴⁴ Pokorny *Colossians* 99.

⁴⁵ Pokorny *Colossians* 99.

⁴⁶ Outi Leppä *The making of Colossians* 105.

⁴⁷ Buttigieg Dorianne "Melita Theologica," *Journal of the Faculty of Theology University of Malta*, no. 66/1 (2016): 87.

⁴⁸ Leppä, *The Making of Colossians* 105.



The sixth view sees the afflictions of Christ in objective genitive. This is the view the writer of this article holds. Accordingly, Paul is going through these sufferings for the sake of Christ. This objective genitive view is supported by many biblical accounts, some of which have been highlighted already. Chief among them is 1 Thess. 3:3-4, 2 Cor.1:5, Phil.1:29-30 and Acts 9:16. The strength of this view is that it satisfactorily answers the question of what is lacking. Therefore, according to this view, what is lacking has nothing to do with Christ's death in atoning for the sins of the world. Rather, they are the persecutions and trials and all that fits under afflictions that Paul bears for the sake of Christ and for the benefit of his body, the church. These afflictions are lacking in the sense that the body of Christ, the church, is still here on earth, and as it bears witness to Christ, persecutions will be meted on her. These afflictions will surely come (John 15:20, 16:33, Acts 14; 22). This is because the witness of Christ in the world and the proclamation of the Gospel offends the worldly systems. What Paul suffers for the sake of Christ is what the entire church suffers (1Thess.3:3-8). It is not unique to Paul. In this verse, Paul has laid bare the fact of his sufferings as a minister of the Gospel, and this seems to have the intended outcome of the recipients giving him a listening heart as he confronts the heresy that the Colossians seem to have embraced. If he has suffered for them and his afflictions are for the church's benefit, he is worthy of being listened to. This greatly enhances his credentials, boosting his chances of winning them to his side.

The Stewardship of the Minister (vs. 25-27)

Greek Text ²⁵ ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ, ²⁶ τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ, ²⁷ τοῖς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης

Translation 25 of which I became a servant according to the stewardship of God given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, 26 the mystery hidden from the ages and from the generations but now revealed to his saints

Verse 25. This verse advances Paul's last idea in verse 24. ἧς “ of which” is a relative pronoun genitive agreeing with its antecedent ἡ ἐκκλησία . It further modifies the verbal noun “a minister,” thus making it an adverbial accusative with reference. It answers the question concerning what he has become as a minister. διάκονος is in predicate nominative, thus



completing the meaning of the subject⁴⁹. Paul, in this verse, takes his argument a notch higher. As much as he suffers for the Colossians and his afflictions benefit the church, he does this according to a stewardship from God. This might be intentional from Paul, subtly inviting the recipients of the letter to consider who they listen to in light of the false teachers. From where have they been sent so that Colossians can lend them their hears? The cultural milieu of the Mediterranean alluded to earlier on had placed a high bar for teachers. Paul has presented and will continue to elaborate on his credentials. This argument leaves one thinking: What about the “Philosophers and teachers of this heresy at Colossae?” Do they have matching credentials? Who has sent them?

The preposition κατὰ is in the accusative and is used here in the sense of “on the basis of.” Paul became a minister based on “stewardship.” Οἰκονομίαν is derived from the word οἰκονόμος “manager,” and it describes one to whose care or honor one has been entrusted.⁵⁰ Within Colossians 1:25, Paul’s stewardship from God is preaching the gospel to all but particularly to the Gentiles. There could be an echo here of the Damascus road turnaround for Paul, when, after persecuting the church, he was called to preach the Gospel and suffer for Christ and the Church. This makes Paul forceful in his polemic against the heresy, and understandably so when he says: do not let anyone lead you astray through deception and empty words according to people’s earthly wisdom and way of life... (Col 2:8).⁵¹ The stewardship is from God as expressed in τοῦ θεοῦ “from God.” This is in the ablative genitive, thus expressing the source of the stewardship. The preposition εἰς is the accusative, expressing the purpose for which the stewardship was given, which purpose was to make the word of God fully known. Εἰς ὑμᾶς “for you” is in the accusative emphasizing the subject you (the Colossians and not any other people) and expressing advantage.

The term λόγον is in the accusative case of the direct object, for it receives the action of the transitive verb, while τοῦ θεοῦ “of God” is in ablative genitive (source) but it’s more preferable to see it as descriptive genitive. The context of heresy, which are mere words of men and devoid of anything of value, would make descriptive genitive stand out in contrast. What Paul presents is God’s word with the characteristic divine authority and source as

⁴⁹ Samuel Ngewa, M. *A Study of Intermediate Greek*. (Africa International University. Class manual. July, 2016 Edition) 31.

⁵⁰ J. D Douglas, *New Bible dictionary* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1996)1134.

⁵¹ Author’s translation.



opposed to the words of mere men who lack any power to make people live and walk in triumph over sin(2:23). ⁵²The Colossians have to choose between God’s word and words of men and also between Gods servant and people who haven’t been sent.

In the above verse, λόγον is described as μυστήριον “mystery” hidden from ages and generations. μυστήριον is accusative of simple apposition to λόγον for it clarifies it more. In the Synoptic Gospels, the term μυστήριον appears only in the obscure saying of Jesus about the purpose of miracles (Mark 4:11, Matt. 13:11, Luke 8:10)⁵³. The saying differentiates the disciples and those not committed to discipleship so that to the latter, the parables will withhold knowledge and complete their hardening.⁵⁴ The context of the above texts shows that the mystery is the fact of the coming kingdom of God, which only faith can grasp. The eyes of the disciples are open to the dawn of the messianic age, and by grace, they perceive the mystery of Jesus himself as the Messiah.⁵⁵

In the Pauline corpus, μυστήριον is firmly connected with the *kerygma* of Christ, and he (Christ) is the μυστήριον of God (Col. 1:27, 2:2, 4:3).⁵⁶The μυστήριον is also the wisdom of God and has the following characteristics; 1. Prepared before the world was (1 Cor. 2:7), 2. Concealed from aeons (1 Cor. 2:8; Ephes. 3:9; Col.1:26; Rom. 16:25).⁵⁷3. It’s hidden in God, the creator of all things (Ephes.3:9).

According to Wall, the term mystery here is a metaphor for God’s plan of salvation for the Gentiles, which is only known through divine revelation.⁵⁸ This view is supported by Ephesians 3:2-8. This mystery, therefore, is about God’s Gospel plan to bring in Gentiles to share in the salvation of Israel as equal heirs (Ephes.3:6). This might be what was alluded to in God’s promise to Abram that he will make him father of many nations and that through him all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen.12:3).

This mystery was hidden from the ages and generations. Both αἰώνων and γενεῶν are in the genitive of time case, thus telling us the time during which the mystery has been hidden. Though it has been hidden that long, it has now been revealed to his saints. The word ἁγίοις seems to be in the dative of indirect object, thus answering the question to whom has

⁵² Author’s translation.

⁵³ Bornkamm Gunter “μυστήριον” TDNT. 4:802-828

⁵⁴ Bornkamm Gunter “μυστήριον” TDNT. 4:802-828

⁵⁵ Bornkamm Gunter “μυστήριον” TDNT. 4:802-828

⁵⁶ Bornkamm Gunter “μυστήριον” TDNT. 4:802-828.

⁵⁷ Bornkamm Gunter “μυστήριον” TDNT. 4:802-828.

⁵⁸ Wall, *Colossians and Philemon* 91.



the revelation been given? Elsewhere (Ephes. 3:5), the μυστήριον is revealed to his holy apostles and prophets, and the case here also is in the dative of indirect object. This could be what Paul has in mind here in Col.1:26 so that the prophets and apostles would make it known to the others. The import of this in his polemic may be to further establish his personal credibility and that of his message vis-à-vis that of the false teachers and their message. Consequently, false teachers have no authority over anyone, and what they are spreading is an empty philosophy that should not be listened to. However, Paul has a mystery from God to communicate, which is grounded in his stewardship as a minister of the Gospel. He is worth being listened to. Moreover, unlike the Colossian heresy for the exclusive few, the mystery of God, though hidden before, is now being revealed to his saints.⁵⁹

Verse 27 continues further what is discussed in the previous verse whereby οἷς is a relative pronoun in the dative referring to saints (apostles and prophets).⁶⁰ To them, God chose to make known the πλοῦτος “great riches” of the glory of the mystery among the saints. The Ὁ θεὸς “God” is in subject nominative because it specifies that which produces the action of the finite verb make known. The phrase Χριστός ἐν ὑμῖν, “Christ in you,” seems to describe or qualify the contents of the mystery.

The Toiling of the Servant (1:28-2:5)

Greek Text. ²⁸ ὃν ἡμεῖς καταγγέλλομεν νουθετοῦντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον καὶ διδάσκοντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ, ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ ²⁹ εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει. **2:1** Θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ἡλίκον ἀγῶνα ἔχω ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ ὅσοι οὐχ ἑώρακαν τὸ πρόσωπόν μου ἐν σαρκί, ² ἵνα παρακληθῶσιν αἱ καρδίαι αὐτῶν συμβιβασθέντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ καὶ εἰς πᾶν πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως, εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Χριστοῦ, ³ ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοι. ⁴ Τοῦτο λέγω, ἵνα μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς παραλογίζεται ἐν πιθανολογίᾳ. ⁵ εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῇ σαρκὶ ἄπειμι, ἀλλὰ τῷ πνεύματι σὺν ὑμῖν εἰμι, χαίρων καὶ βλέπων ὑμῶν τὴν τάξιν καὶ τὸ στερέωμα τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως ὑμῶν.

⁵⁹ Authors view.

⁶⁰ The view of the author of this article is that the saints referred to in verse 26 are the apostles and prophets of Ephes.3:5 so that then like verse 27 makes clear, these in turn (apostles and prophets) would make known to others the riches of this mystery.



Translation 28 whom we proclaim, warning every man, and teaching every man, in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus; 29 For this also I labor, striving according to his strength that is working in me mightily. 2:1 For I would want you to know how great a conflict I have for you and for those in Laodicea, and as many as have not seen my face in the flesh

The section starts with ὃν “him,” which is a relative pronoun of Christ in the previous verse, and it’s in the accusative case of the direct object of the verb proclaim. This verse describes what Paul does with the contents of the mystery. He proclaims Christ by warning and teaching. Proclaim καταγγέλλομεν is a verb in the present (descriptive), indicative active. The two other verbs that accompany proclamation are διδάσκοντες and νουθετοῦντες, all of which are participles in the descriptive present and in the nominative, thus pointing out how the proclamation is done. The term σοφία is in the dative of means, and it seems to describe how teaching and admonishing are done. The last part of this verse is a subordinate clause with a result clause as indicated by ἵνα conjunction. The maturity in Christ of all who are taught and admonished is the outcome or the result of the actions described. Wall opines that Paul has an eschatological goal in mind here, like the plan of God’s salvation (1:22), which is the final justification of saints.⁶¹ This is a calculated hit at the false teachers and their falsehood. Paul’s Gospel is Christ’s ward (it’s about Christ), while heresy takes people away from Christ.

Verses 29 and 2:1 describe Paul’s struggles so that the result of verse 28 (present everyone matures in Christ) is reached. To this end, he toils κοπιῶ. This is a verb in the descriptive present. The verb is followed by another participle ἀγωνιζόμενος, (struggling), which is in the present (descriptive) participle in the nominative, thus telling how he toils (he toils hard with all the energy God gives him). In verse (2:1), much of what he has said previously is repeated, except that he mentions another group of people who are recipients of the benefits of his struggles. Paul expresses a strong desire for the Colossians and others (Laodiceans) to know how much his struggles for them are. The word γάρ (for) is a subordinate conjunction used here to either give grounds for the conclusion or warning he will issue against the heresy. He will warn against heresy because he is entitled to warn them against any danger as one who toils for them.

⁶¹ Wall, Colossians and Philemon, 95.



The word Θέλω “I want” is in the present descriptive indicative. Paul seems to be laying a strong ground to attack the heresy and can only do it well by establishing that he is one of them through his struggles. This may have the net effect of Colossians being inclined to listen to Paul because he means well to them in his argument.

Verse 2:2 starts with a subordinate conjunction ἵνα “that,” introducing a purpose-dependent clause. This purpose is “that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love and to reach all the riches of full understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery...” (2:2). The sure means by which the Colossians would withstand delusion by plausible arguments, is their unity of love, full assurance of understanding, and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ (2:2). The μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ “God’s mystery” may be qualitative genitive bringing out the characteristics of the mystery but it’s more preferable to see it as genitive of source; it’s from God. The last words of this verse contain another genitive Χριστοῦ, “which is Christ.” This is an exegetical genitive, identifying the other noun more specifically.

Paul winds up the pericope by introducing another ἵνα clause for his labors, which is that “no one would delude you with plausible arguments” (2:4). It seems that the result of deception arising from the persuasive arguments in verse 4 would be the opposite of order and firmness of faith in Christ. Therefore, it would follow that the negative purpose statement, “no one would delude you with plausible arguments” (Col 2:4) would be fittingly replaced with a positive purpose statement, “to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (Col 2:5). It’s the view of the writer of this paper that the statements, “no one may delude you with plausible arguments” (2:4) and “to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ” (2:5), express the same idea. The difference is that one is put negatively and the other positively.

Paul has made it clear in this pericope that he is a minister who suffers for the Colossians and the body of Christ, and in so doing, he fills the remaining unavoidable afflictions that accompany the preaching of the Gospel. His ministry is grounded in the stewardship that he received from God, which stewardship is about the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. The contents of this mystery are Christ, and the mystery is from God. In him (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; therefore, the Colossians should not be led astray through plausible arguments of



false teachers. Christ is sufficient, and because all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form in him, the Colossians, too, have been made complete. Christ alone (a person, not philosophy) can give completeness.

Application of the Study

In light of the findings discussed above concerning Paul's suffering and the afflictions of Christ, it's clear that these are not unique but do come in the cause of believers bearing their witness for Christ. The afflictions of Christ are the tribulations and trials all believers will go through for the sake of Christ. Wall's remark that Paul's idea of suffering should be seen from the perspective of his self-understanding as a servant of the gospel is precise.⁶² Paul makes it clear that these persecutions in their various shades (imprisonment, hardships, arrests, floggings, tribulations, and even death) would come in Acts 14:22. The certainty of afflictions that the church of Christ will experience is amply talked about in other scriptures outside of Pauline corpus (Luke. 21:12-16, Mark 13:12, Rev.13:17). Like Dunn points out, Paul accepted suffering as the un-avoidable consequence of the all-important objective of preaching the gospel.⁶³

Therefore, these afflictions are necessary for a believer and should be expected rather than shunned. In light of the understanding that afflictions would come, the early church had a rather healthy attitude towards them. They counted it an honor to suffer for the sake of Christ (Acts 5:41, Rom.12:12, James 1:2-4, 1Pet.1:6). For Paul, the sufferings and afflictions he goes through are for the benefit of Colossians and the body of Christ, the Church. His sufferings benefit the church because the Gospel is spread more and taken to places it could not have gone in any other way except through the path of afflictions. In Philippians 1:11-13, he proudly bears the badge of honor for the situation of his imprisonment, which has served to advance the Gospel. His imprisonment has made the entire imperial guard and others know that he is imprisoned for the sake of Christ.

The recent events in Kenya regarding terrorism have brought this to the fore. In the April 2015 Garissa terrorist attack, eyewitnesses and the survivors say that the terrorists went straight to where the Christians were doing their morning devotion and sprayed them with

⁶² Wall, Colossians & Philemon, 86.

⁶³ Dunn, Colossians and to Philemon, 114



bullets, as they called them infidels. This terrorist attack against believers emboldened the church more in the spread of the Gospel, contrary to what the terrorists might have thought. In another related incident in North Eastern Kenya, terrorists entered a bus, and those who couldn't recite an Islamic prayer were judged Christians and so were all shot dead on account of their faith in Christ. Although this does not show how their suffering confers a benefit to the church, it still demonstrates suffering for the sake of Christ and on account of their faith in him.

Another good example of how saints bear the brunt of persecution for the sake of Christ is the arrest of Pastor Wang Yi and about a hundred of his church members, which resulted in Wang Yi being imprisoned for nine years. Yet in spite of that, the pastor refused to be intimidated to silence. There are a lot of faith-related deaths, murders, and detentions in China every year,⁶⁴ yet by God's grace, believers in Christ have continued to grow strong as a shining example of Paul's words in asserting that nothing can separate us from the love of God(not even death) Rom 8:27.

The history of Kenya and East Africa has ample evidence of missionaries who left their homeland to traverse the jungles of East and Africa to spread the light of the Gospel. Some of them, like Dr. David Livingstone and Dr. Ludwig Kraft, were often sick with Malaria and tsetse-fly-related sicknesses and lacked essential supplies. His wife, Mary, too, died of fever in Africa while their children were in England.⁶⁵ Dr. Livingstone's health failed him often, yet for the love of Africa, he refused to accompany Stanley Morton back home to England. His missionary work till he died. These missionaries no doubt suffered so much, and their suffering left a great Christian legacy and advanced the cause of Christ immensely.

There are other glowing examples in present-day Kenya of men and women whose suffering and afflictions in their missionary endeavors in Northern Kenya have benefited the church. Normally, these volunteers spend time learning the Indigenous people's language, teaching in their schools, and building houses. These missionaries face very hostile weather (extreme heat, Malaria) and hostile people, and in some cases, there have been abductions. The sacrifices of these missionaries have made the church of Christ grow in very extreme

⁶⁴ Oshman Jen, *Imprisonment in China*, June 4, 2024, Retrieved from, <https://www.jenoshman.com/jen-oshman-blog/2020/2/27/imprisonment-in-china-a-means-by-which-to-preach-the-gospel>

⁶⁵ Calhuon David B. "David Livingstone" Profile in Faith, June Retrieved from <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/resources/david-livingstone-1813-1873/>



environments; amazingly, the extreme environment has not dampened the missionaries' spirits. Many more continue to sense God's call on their lives to bear witness for him there, and in the cause, they suffer for his sake. Their suffering benefits the church because many are encouraged through their example, and many get converted to Christianity. These are just a sample representation of testimonies of men and women who like Paul, never shied from sharing Christ on account of danger and afflictions. Like Paul, these missionaries and all believers who would suffer affliction for the sake of Christ and thereby confer a benefit to the church would find encouragement in Paul's words to Corinthians: Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed daily.¹⁷ "For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison..." 2 Cor. 4:16-17.

Conclusion

The letter to the Colossians has no unanimity regarding its author. The writer of this article holds the view that Colossians is a genuine Pauline letter because the early church fathers accepted it and because the letter itself attributes it to Paul. The letter establishes the supremacy of Christ above all (natural creation and the new moral creation). For this reason, the Colossians should not let anyone take them captive through philosophy and empty deceit (2:8). The words *παθήμασιν* and *θλίψεων* are synonymously used in 2 Cor. 1:4-7. It is more preferable to see them used as such in Col 1:24. Moreover, the term *θλίψεων* "afflictions" has not been used anywhere else in the NT about the atoning death of Christ but rather the various sufferings of Paul. This verse has two halves (24a and 24b) set in a parallel structure, with the second half playing an explicative role on the first. Therefore, the lacking afflictions of Christ are the sufferings of Paul for Christ's sake and are in objective genitive.

In his polemic against the Colossian heresy, Paul employs the persuasive tactics of the Mediterranean cultural milieu, which endeared a speaker to his listeners if he showed his sufferings to them. This may be why the word suffering in various shades, runs through the pericope. Paul is a servant of the Church and suffers for her benefit in working out the stewardship from God to proclaim the mystery of God's word. This will likely make the Colossians embrace Paul's argument against that of the false teachers.

Paul's toiling as a servant of the Church has the result infinitive that the Colossians would be presented mature in Christ, reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding



and the knowledge of God’s mystery, and finally, no one would delude them with plausible arguments.

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