

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Ministry: The Struggle is Real

Colossians 1:24–2:5

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to the book of Colossians. We are continuing our verse-by-verse study of this book in our series "Preeminence." And we come today to Colossians 1:24–2:5. That is our passage for today.

In preparation for this morning, I looked up this last week some of the requirements for becoming a Navy SEAL, just in case some of you are interested in going that route. I'd do it myself, but I'm too busy pastoring to do this.

The minimum physical standards are (1) a 500-yard swim in 12 minutes and 30 seconds, (2) 50 push-ups in 2 minutes, (3) 50 sit-ups in 2 minutes, (4) 10 pull-ups, and (5) a 1.5-mile run in 10 minutes and 30 seconds. Those are just the preliminary standards.

Once you are accepted into the program, the training becomes extremely difficult both physically and mentally. First, you go through BUD/S training (Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL Training). You are pushed through intense workouts, long runs, obstacle courses, carrying heavy logs with your team, and "Hell Week," which lasts over five days with almost no sleep and nonstop physical activity.

After that, you train in combat skills such as shooting weapons, working in small teams, handling explosives, and patrolling in dangerous environments. Once BUD/S is complete, you attend Army Airborne School to learn parachuting, then move on to SEAL Qualification Training (SQT), where you receive advanced instruction in survival, communications, medical care, cold-weather operations, and more advanced combat skills before officially becoming a Navy SEAL.

Sounds like fun! The endgame of all that training is that you *officially* become a Navy SEAL. All of that suffering leads to something great. And it cost the *trainee* something, but it also costs the *trainer* something. From what I understand, it costs the US Navy about a million dollars and 10,000 manhours for each Navy SEAL trained. That's pretty costly.

Now, let's envision something similar in the training to become a fully mature Christian in Christ. Paul says in verse 28, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." Paul's great desire with the Colossian brothers and sisters is that they become the equivalent of Navy SEALs in their Christian lives—fully mature in Christ!

But to get to that goal, it's going to cost something. It's going to cost the minister something, and it's going to cost the trainee something. If I could say it this way—it's going to cost the *discipler* something, and it's going to cost the *disciple* something.¹

And Paul's going to walk us through five things in this passage.² Write these down.
If we are going to present others mature in Christ...

1) There will be **suffering** (1:24)³

¹ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 119: "In light of Paul's emphasis on God's plan, the progression from God the Father (1:3–14) to Christ the Son (1:15–23) that leads to the present section on Paul the servant of Christ (1:24–2:5) becomes understandable. In the next section, the focus is then shifted to the recipients of the gospel that the apostles are preaching (2:6–4:1)."

² Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 44: "It will be especially profitable for those who are in the professional ministry, but it ought to prove equally helpful for every serious believer, because we are all called to the 'ministry,' whatever our stated vocation."

³ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 118: "This connection between the cosmic Christ and the particular servant explains a number of parallels that exist between these two sections: suffering (1:24, 29; 2:1; cf. 1:18, 20), physical body (1:24; cf. 1:22), church

Look at **verse 24**. The emphasis here is on Paul's suffering as the discipler, not the suffering of the Christian trainee. Paul says...

²⁴Now I rejoice in my sufferings

Rejoice?⁴ Really, Paul?⁵

for your sake [**Colossian believers**], and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions⁶ for the sake of his body,⁷ that is, the church,⁸

Fascinating statement by Paul. Obviously Paul is not saying that somehow Christ's suffering and Christ's atonement is insufficient for us as believers.⁹ Trust me, Paul is not saying that.¹⁰ Paul says elsewhere that Christ and his suffering on the cross is completely sufficient for our salvation (see **Rom 3:24–25; 5:8–9; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; Col 1:19–20**).¹¹

So what does he mean here? What is he talking about here with his statement, "what is lacking in Christ's affliction" (**1:24**)? He means that he has to suffer for the sake of the church in addition to Christ's

(1:24; cf. 1:18), and Christ (1:24, 27, 28; 2:5; cf. 1:15–20)."

⁴ JOHN CALVIN: "Paul is joyful in persecution, because he considers, in accordance with what he writes elsewhere, that we must carry about with us in our body the death of Christ, so that his life may be manifested in us." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 165.

⁵ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 123: "The coexistence of joy and suffering can be found elsewhere in Paul (cf. 2 Cor 6:10), especially when this suffering is related to his proclamation of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:18–19). This reference to suffering highlights its importance in his apostolic ministry (cf. Rom 5:3; 2 Tim 1:12; 3:11). It also points to Paul's imitation of Christ's suffering (cf. 1 Thess 1:6) and to his authority as an apostle called to this path of suffering (cf. Acts 9:26)."

⁶ JOHANNES BUGHENHAGEN: "This passage is not to be understood as diminishing Christ's suffering, which Paul has said was necessary on our account. It would be most inept and impious if you were to say this and contradict Paul, who just a few verses earlier said that we have peace through the blood of Christ. After all, it was not Paul who was crucified for us. But if you accept that Christ suffered and all the saints suffer in imitation of Christ, then the saying follows: Whoever wants to live in Christ will undergo suffering. It is certain that the suffering of the saints is not yet complete... But the afflictions of the saints are the afflictions of Christ, just as he says to Paul: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' Because of this we should take maximal consolation, because our sufferings are Christ's sufferings, so that whatever we endure pleases God the Father, just as Christ's sufferings pleased him." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 164.

⁷ CHRYSOSTOM: "It seems indeed to be a great thing Paul has said, but it is not based on arrogance, far be it. Rather, Paul's words come from his deep love towards Christ. For he will not have the sufferings to be his own, but his, through the desire to reconcile these persons to him. And what things I suffer, I suffer, he says, on his account. Therefore, don't thank me, but express your gratitude to Christ, for it is he himself who suffers." Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 24.

⁸ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 76: "When he says I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) he is indicating that the physical pain he endures at the hands of Christ-hating persecutors is the result of what he does to benefit and build the church. It was not his personality that offended and brought hostile injury to him, but his ministry for the Body of Christ."

⁹ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 45: "Paul did not help with the Atonement; that was Christ's solo work. But one thing that the phrase does teach for sure (and everyone agrees on this) is that a close identification develops between Christ and the Church through suffering."

¹⁰ HULDRYCH ZWINGLI: "This text has often been misinterpreted. We ought, therefore, to speak of this interpretation: 'I supply what is left over, not what is lacking.' For the passion of Christ, which alone is fully sufficient, lacks nothing. But some suffering still remains in his body as the members become like the head. Christians are one body with Christ the head. Christ suffers and labors when his betrothed must go through afflictions. So it is that when one member suffers, all suffer with it, and this one member suffers for all. This is the will of God, that he leaves us in this age of suffering in order that we may be conformed to the image of the Son himself... But Christ is the only one whose suffering for us made satisfaction for sin. No other creature is able to do this, because all are sinners, and all fall short of the glory of God." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 164.

¹¹ LANCELOT RIDLEY: "What Paul says here ... is nothing else but what Saint Peter says (1 Pet 2) where he says that Christ has suffered for us, leaving to us an example, that we should follow his footsteps: that is, that we should suffer afflictions after the example of Christ." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 166.

suffering in order to present them mature in Christ.¹² He has to suffer for the growth of others.¹³ Christ isn't the only one that suffers. We suffer in imitation of him for the sake of others. **And that's a good thing for us to imitate Christ in that way.**¹⁴

And that's true in all areas of leadership. A husband dies to himself for the sake of his wife. A father and a mother die to themselves for the sake of their children. A boss at work (a good boss anyway) dies to himself or herself for the sake of the employees. A coach dies to himself or herself for the sake of the players. A general in the Army dies to himself for the sake of his soldiers.¹⁵

Now the next question might be the following—how has Paul died to himself? What is he talking about here with his afflictions? Well, remember now, Paul is even now in prison in Rome as he writes this letter.¹⁶

Why is he in prison? Did he break the law? No. He's in prison for testifying to Christ. He's in prison for advancing the mission of Christ. He's in prison for advancing the work of the church. He's in prison because unbelieving Jews and unbelieving Gentiles have opposed him from all over the Roman Empire. He suffers, and the church benefits. He suffers, and the church explodes. He suffers, but the disciples mature and multiply.

And God ordained that. Remember what God said to Paul when he first got called to ministry? It's an amazing statement. We looked at this repeatedly when we went through the book of **Acts** together.

Acts 9:15–16 says as follows... this is the Lord Jesus telling Ananias what to tell the church-persecuting Saul who will become eventually the world-altering Apostle Paul, "But the Lord said to [Ananias], 'Go, for [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.'"

Wow! So Paul had to suffer for the benefit of others. He was *afflicted* in order that the church might be *benefitted*. And God ordained this.

You might say, **"That's the Apostle Paul, Pastor Tony. What does that have to do with me? He's an apostle. I'm not."** Well, okay. **Here's where this principle is transferable in our day—if you are going to be serious about the work of discipleship in your in family, in your church, in your ministry, you will suffer. You will.**

You will suffer heartbreak. You will suffer setbacks. You will suffer betrayal. You will suffer "death to self" in order to produce life and health and maturity in another. Paul experienced actually physical suffering for his work of ministry and discipleship.

And you may too. But probably your experiences will be more mental, spiritual, and psychological than physical. Nevertheless, there will be suffering. It'll be difficult. And if Paul could rejoice in it, we can do that too.

¹² SEVERIAN OF GABALA: "Since Christ is the head of the body, tribulation will be generated through the word of truth for those who are in the church. These are naturally called the sufferings of Christ." Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 24.

¹³ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 76: "Jesus, having ascended to heaven, was out of their reach. But because His enemies had not filled up all the injuries they wanted to inflict on Him, they turned their hatred on those who preached the gospel. It was in that sense that Paul filled up what was lacking in Christ's afflictions."

¹⁴ Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 45: "The gospel has always spread through missionary hardship. But there is something more here, and it is far more subtle: believers grow through their personal suffering, and the good they receive flows to others—thus edifying the Church."

¹⁵ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 152–3: "Because Paul's apostolic ministry is an 'extension' of Christ's work in the world, Paul identifies his own sufferings very closely with Christ's. These sufferings have no redemptive benefit for the church, but they are the inevitable accompaniment of Paul's 'commission' to proclaim the end-time revelation of God's mystery (vv. 25–27). It is in this way that Paul's sufferings are 'on behalf of' the church, including the Colossian Christians. And, of course, as a prisoner for the gospel, Paul is suffering for them even as he writes. As members of the fellowship of those raised with Christ and forming therefore part of Christ's body, we also are the beneficiaries of Paul's suffering."

¹⁶ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 149–150: "Paul did not found the church at Colossae, nor has he visited the church (2:1; cf. 1:8). Yet in some manner the suffering that Paul undergoes in his gospel ministry has benefits for the Colossians."

We rejoice through the suffering for a purpose. We don't just rejoice in the raw suffering itself. That's masochism. We rejoice through the suffering to produce maturity in another person.¹⁷

And if you don't want to suffer... if you don't want to risk that for the work of discipleship... then go ahead... live a cushy, selfish, sad, uninteresting life and die an unmourned death. That's an option for you too. But to that I say, "No thank you!" I'll take rejoicing through the suffering for the sake of something meaningful... thank you very much!¹⁸

If we are going to present others mature in Christ, there will be suffering. But also ... Write this down as a second point in your notes:

If we are going to present others mature in Christ...

2) There will be **gospel** (1:25–27)

In fact, there must be gospel. Look at **verse 25**. Actually let me start in the middle of **verse 24** to ramp up to **verse 25**.

²⁴ ... In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body,¹⁹ that is, the church, ²⁵of which I became a minister [διδάκωνος]²⁰ according to the stewardship²¹ from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

Why did Paul suffer? Why was he willing to suffer? To make the word of God known. That was that important to him.

Now, the word of God here is not a reference to Scripture, although let's not dismiss Scripture as part of the equation. The reference to "word of God" here is a reference to the gospel. And the gospel is clearly presented in what we read in God's Word, the Scripture.

In Greek the word here is λόγος (*logos*). And λόγος is a versatile word which means literally "word." It can refer to Scripture. It can refer to the gospel. It can also refer to Jesus Christ himself, as we see in **John 1:1**—"In the beginning was the λόγος."

In this case, in this verse, λόγος is a reference to the gospel. The "word of God" here is the gospel that was entrusted to Paul and then unleashed among the Gentiles.²²

¹⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 74: "The joy of the early church was a dramatic testimony to the world. The second-century apologist Aristides wrote to the Roman emperor Antonius Pius a description of Christians that said if any righteous person from among them passed from this world the Christians would rejoice and give thanks to God. When a child was born to Christian parents, they would praise God. If it died in infancy, according to Aristides, the parents thanked God even more because the child would be one who had passed through the world without encountering sin."

¹⁸ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 145: "In a meeting with pastors of underground churches in a 'closed' society, I was struck by the response they gave when asked of the greatest worries they have for their churches: 'the end of the persecution of our churches.' Their response reflects a realization that the lack of suffering and affliction can often lead to a lazy church that is no longer alert in her existence between the times. For those in the "free" world, we are called to be alert as faithful witnesses in our own contexts."

¹⁹ LANCELOT RIDLEY: "I fulfill that which are behind, of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake: This place has by some evil people been wrested out of tune and from his true sense. To the great contumely of Christ's blood, they would say that Christ's blood was not a full satisfaction for our redemption, forgiveness of our sins, but that it something lacked which by our work, deed, merit or afflictions should be fulfilled and satisfied; they would say that Christ's passion was not sufficient to take away the sins of the whole world and that Christ had not fully satisfied for the sins of all people. To think or say this is great blasphemy to Christ and to his holy blood. God forbid that anyone should think so or say it. For Christ by his death once for all has fully and perfectly satisfied for the sins of all people, and by one oblation he made them perfect who shall be holy (Heb 10)." Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 165.

²⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 148: "Paul's reference to himself as a 'servant' of the gospel at the end of v. 23 leads into this section, which focuses on the ministry of Paul."

²¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 154: "Paul uses similar language elsewhere to describe his apostleship (note the language of 'which was given me by God' in Rom. 12:3; 15:15; 1 Cor. 3:10; Gal. 2:9). These parallels suggest that *oikonomia* refers to his apostolic ministry. God chose Paul before his birth (Gal. 1:15) to become an apostle, with particular responsibility to bring the good news to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:17–18; see v. 27). This is the "commission" of which he speaks here."

²² Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 128: "Paul is not simply aiming to fill the audience with the word of God; instead, Paul is focusing on the need to fulfill the mission of God's word. As that word is destined to grow and bear fruit 'in the whole world' (v. 6),

And Paul says about that λόγος that it was, **verse 26**,

²⁶the mystery hidden²³ for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

God's plan to save sinners was arranged before the creation of the world according to **Ephesians 1**. God decided to do this before time itself began. And his plan was cloaked in mystery all throughout the OT.

You had these clues as to what God was doing in the OT:

- (1) The seed of the woman crushing the head of the serpent (**Gen 3:15**)
- (2) The Passover Lamb whose blood brings deliverance (**Exod 12**)
- (3) The animal sacrifices in the Israelite nation (**Lev 16**)
- (4) The bronze serpent in the wilderness (**Num 21:4–9**)
- (5) The prophet like Moses whom God would raise up (**Deut 18:15–19**)
- (6) The “greater than David” son of David, who is a true and better high priest than Melchizedek (**Ps 110**)
- (7) The Savior born in Bethlehem (**Mic 5:2**)
- (8) The shoot from the stump of Jesse (**Isa 11:1–10**)
- (9) The Suffering Servant who will bear the sins of many (**Isa 53**)
- (10) The Son of Man coming with everlasting dominion (**Dan 7:13–14**)

All of these pieces of the mystery were revealed ultimately in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. They were foreshadowed in the OT; they were revealed in the NT. And now, that mystery is unleashed and unveiled to his saints. We have it. We know what those OT passages were pointing to. Mystery revealed!²⁴

And part of that mystery involved the salvation of Gentiles (like me) as part of God's redemptive work.²⁵ Look at **verse 27**.

²⁷To them [i.e., “the saints” of **verse 26**] 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.

Question: What was the mystery? **Answer:** Christ.

Question: Who did God reveal it to? **Answer:** Both Jews and Gentiles in this NT era.

Question: How glorious is this mystery? **Answer:** Exceedingly glorious and rich.

Question: What is our hope for future glory? **Answer:** Christ in you, the hope of glory.

If you know Christ, and if you have Christ in you (or more specifically the Spirit of Christ in you), then you have a deposit of a future inheritance in you right now. That is your hope of glory. That is your hope for the future. That trumps anything and everything in this world.²⁶

I know that I told you already that “in Christ” is the most important prepositional phrase in the book of **Colossians**. I stand by that. But Paul adds another component to that here. Not only are you *in Christ*, but also Christ is *in you*.²⁷ Look at the end of **verse 27**.

Paul, as the bearer of this word, is to participate in fulfilling its mission. In v. 27, he further explains that this fulfillment is to be found in proclaiming the gospel among the Gentiles.”

²³ AUGUSTINE: “He didn’t hide them in order to deny them to us but to rouse our desire for what is hidden. That is the value of secrets.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 27.

²⁴ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 78: “There are some things God reveals to no one. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, ‘The secret things belong to the Lord our God.’ God reveals other things only to certain people. ‘The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him’ (Ps. 25:14). Proverbs 3:32 says, ‘He is intimate with the upright.’ Still other things were hidden in the Old Testament but have now been revealed in the New.”

²⁵ AMBROSIAS: “The mystery which has been hidden from the ages, he asserts, has now been revealed, that is, shown forth in the time of the apostles: that the Gentiles have been admitted without circumcision to the faith of Christ, which was promised to the Jews.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 26.

²⁶ CHRYSOSTOM: “From not knowing even what God is, they have suddenly become sharers even in God’s throne.... The mystery entails all these things; all come from the presence of Christ in the Colossian believers. ‘If Christ is in you,’ Paul asks, ‘why do you seek angels?’” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 26.

²⁷ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 159: “Paul often speaks of Christians as those who are ‘in Christ’ (see 1:2), but only rarely does he reverse the imagery and refer to Christ ‘in’ us (Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20; 4:19; Eph. 3:17). But the point of both expressions is the same (cf., e.g., Rom. 8:1 and 10), stressing the intimate relationship between Christ and his people and the way in which, because of this relationship, Christ fully represents us.”

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.

If that doesn't fire you up for Jesus, then your wood is wet. If that doesn't help you to press on through the difficulties and challenges and suffering in ministry, then you need a "perspective checkup." All of this suffering in this world is going to pale in comparison to our future glory.

Why would Paul suffer as much as he did for a church full of believers like the Colossians whom he had never met? Why would he suffer like that? Because Christ is that awesome. And the hope for future glory is that important. That'll fire you up and get you to press on through challenges in life... in Paul's case being wrongfully imprisoned in Rome.

The story is told about a young Methodist minister in London, back in the days when Methodists were actually passionate about Jesus, that he was too shy and too softspoken to be in ministry. And the famous W.E. Sangster interviewed him as a ministry candidate. And the young man said, "I am not the sort of person who would set the Thames River on fire—that is, stir up the city."

And Dr. Sangster responded by saying, "My dear young brother, I'm not interested to know if you could set the Thames on fire. What I want to know is this: if I picked you up by the scruff of your neck and dropped you into the Thames, would it sizzle?"²⁸

Look, I don't know about you, but I want to sizzle for the gospel. If you picked me up by the scruff of my neck and dropped me into Canyon Lake, I want to sizzle. And not just because it's 110 degrees in the shade.

"O Pastor Tony is so excitable. Someday he'll understand." I don't want to understand. "O Pastor Tony is too passionate for the gospel. Someday he'll chill out." I don't want to chill out.

"Pastor Tony, when he gets older, he'll get mellow." I don't want to get older. I can't help that one. But just because I get older, doesn't mean I have to get mellow... not as it relates to the gospel.

Look, if you are going to be in ministry... if you are going to serve Christ and make disciples... there needs to be gospel, and there needs to be passion for the gospel. Because everything in terms of maturity in Christ depends upon Christ and the gospel. Your *salvation* is dependent on it. Your *sanctification* is dependent on it. And your future *glorification* is dependent on it—Christ in you, the hope of glory. That is everything. If you have that, you have everything you need, no matter what you lack.

The great evangelist George Whitefield said once, "Other men may preach the gospel better than I, but no man can preach a better gospel."²⁹

Write this down as a third point in your notes. If we are going to present others mature in Christ,

3) There will be **striving** in the **Spirit** (1:28–29)

Look at **verse 28**:

²⁸Him we³⁰ proclaim,

Him who? Him, Christ. We proclaim Christ.

The Apostle Paul states elsewhere in **2 Corinthians 4:5**, "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants [δοῦλος (*doulos*)] for Jesus' sake." Paul uses the word δοῦλος there, which could just as easily be translated "slaves." In **Colossians 1**, he uses the word διάκονος (*diakonos*) repeatedly which is another word for "servant" (although the ESV repeatedly translates it "minister" here [**1:7, 23, 25**]).

²⁸ Taken from Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 51.

²⁹ Taken from Hughes, *Colossians and Philemon*, 48.

³⁰ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 131: "The appearance of the first person plural pronoun 'we' (ἡμεῖς) is surprising, especially in light of the use of first person singular verbs before and after this verse (cf. vv. 24, 25, 29). Reading in light of first person plural verbs in v. 3, many assume that Paul is primarily referring to his specific coworkers (see vv. 1, 7–8; cf. 4:12–13), while others entertain the possibility of Paul's use of the 'editorial we' in this context. But both readings fail to explain the sudden appearance of this plural pronoun. It is more likely that Paul is intentionally including all who participate in the proclamation of the gospel message with this pronoun, and this group cannot be limited to those noted in this letter."

Are we δούλος or διάκονος for Christ? Which is it? We're both! We are slaves. We are servants. We are ministers. We are disciples of Christ Jesus. And we *proclaim* him!

²⁸Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone³¹ with all wisdom,³² that we may present everyone³³ mature in Christ.

²⁹For this I toil,³⁴ struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.³⁵

Presenting people mature in Christ is no joke. It's toil, says Paul.³⁶ The struggle is real. Ministry is hard. Discipleship is difficult. But we are called to do hard things. We are made for it. Who wants an easy, cushy, boring life? Not me.

But here's the promise in that. The power to struggle and labor and work and present people mature in Christ is the Lord's. And he helps us to strive by the power of his Spirit.

Because what is the "energy" that he powerfully works in me? Look again at **verse 29**. What is that a reference to? That energy? **Red-bull? Is that a reference to caffeine or a protein-rich diet? No! I'm not against those things.** But that's not what Paul is talking about here.

The power is his because the work is his. Christ gave us *his* Holy Spirit so that we can do *his* work. And greater is he that is in me than he that is in the world (**1 John 4:4**).

Christ said this... this is such a good passage concerning his Spirit. This is **John 16:7**: "Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." And of course we know that God the Son went to sit at the right hand of God the Father to intercede on our behalf. And he left the Holy Spirit to do his work here in this world.

Can you imagine Peter and John and the other disciples when Jesus said this? They probably were like, "No, Jesus. Please don't go. You can't go."

And Jesus is like, "Don't worry, fellas. It's better this way. The Helper will help you." And sure enough, Paul is testifying 30 years later that the Helper is doing his thing. The Holy Spirit is active.

²⁹For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

And wouldn't you know it, not just 30 years later, but 2,000 years later, the Holy Spirit is still doing his thing among believers—the work of discipleship and the work of ministry. He's still helping us accomplish Jesus's mission. **And if we are going to present others mature in Christ, there will be striving in the Spirit.**

Write this down as a fourth point in your notes. If we are going to present others mature in Christ,

4) There will be **encouragement** (2:1–3)

Look at **chapter 2, verse 1**:

³¹ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 133: "Against the elitists, Paul is again emphasizing the universal scope and power of this gospel. In this verse, Paul points to both Jews and Gentiles as recipients of God's work through Christ."

³² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 148–9: "Wisdom and knowledge were very common goals in the ancient world, and it is possible that the false teachers were claiming that it was through their doctrines and practices that ultimate knowledge could be attained."

³³ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 159–60: "Particularly striking is the threefold 'every person' (*panta anthrōpon*). This emphasis continues a theme that runs through chapter 1; see v. 6, 'the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world'; and v. 23, 'the gospel ... has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.' Paul may again direct this emphasis against the false teachers, who were perhaps advocating an elitism in which salvation was confined to certain 'special' people."

³⁴ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 162: "'Labor'" (*kopiaō*) [ESV: 'toil'] is a general verb for any kind of work (e.g., Luke 5:5; 1 Cor. 4:12; Eph. 4:28; 2 Tim. 2:6), but Paul uses it most often to refer to the 'work' of ministry (e.g., Rom. 16:6, 12; 1 Cor. 15:10; 16:16; Gal. 4:11; Phil. 2:16; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 4:10; 5:17)."

³⁵ Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT, 134: "Paul never allows the readers to consider him as the center of God's work in history."

³⁶ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 81: "No one can successfully serve Jesus Christ without working hard. Lazy pastors, Christian leaders, or laymen will never fulfill the ministry the Lord has called them to."

¹For I want you to know how great a struggle³⁷ I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,

How was Paul struggling? How was Paul struggling for the believers that he had never met and these churches that he had never visited? I assume that he was struggling in prayer. I assume that he was struggling by advising people like Epaphras on how to help the church. I assume that he was struggling to counsel them and even write this letter on how to battle false teachers and the Colossian heresy that had infiltrated the church.

But also, Paul had struggled more specifically than that. He was in Ephesus when the people yelled “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” The people there literally wanted to kill Paul (see **Acts 19**). They tried to kill him. And it was probably during that time that Paul ministered to Epaphras who *planted* the church in Colossae and Philemon who *housed* the church in Colossae. **Paul’s fingerprints were all over that church, even though he had never met many of them.**

Back to verse 1.

¹For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,
²that their hearts³⁸ may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance³⁹ of understanding and the knowledge⁴⁰ of God’s mystery,⁴¹ which is Christ,³in whom⁴² are hidden⁴³ all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.⁴⁴

Wow. What an amazing passage!

Let me simplify what Paul is saying here. Paul is striving and struggling for the church in Colossae, so that their hearts may be encouraged. Encouraged how? Encouraged for what? Well, I would say encouraged to continue maturing in Christ. He wants to present them mature in Christ.

And speaking of “mature in Christ,” Paul gives some tell-tale features of what maturity in Christ looks like in **verse 2**. First of all, “They are knit together in love.” Does everyone see that in **verse 2? Christian maturity is not a solo sport. It’s a group activity. Discipleship is not like tennis; it’s more like basketball.** Discipleship requires teamwork and hearts that are knitted together in love.

³⁷ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 164: “The close connection between 1:29 and 2:1 is signaled especially by the language of ‘contending,’ [ESV: ‘struggle’] a form of the same word occurring here in 2:1 (the noun *agōn*), which has also been used in 1:29 (the verb *agōnizomai*). As in 1:29, Paul characterizes his ministry as involving hard work, often in difficult circumstances and against dedicated opponents.”

³⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 165: “References to the ‘heart’ in the Bible require English speakers to “distance” themselves from their own culture. For the strong tendency in modern English is to use heart with reference to the emotions, whereas in Scripture ‘heart’ designates the center of the personality, the source of willing and thinking in addition to feeling... ‘Encouraged in heart’ or ‘to have hearts encouraged’ is therefore a way of referring to an encouragement that touches the deepest part of our being and that affects every aspect of our persons.”

³⁹ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 89–90: “No one can look forward with hope to the blessings of heaven who doubts whether he is going there.”

⁴⁰ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 156: “Paul emphasizes the point, of course, to remind the Colossians that it is by receiving (1:5) and holding fast (1:23) to the gospel that they have access to this ultimate knowledge—not via the program of the false teachers.”

⁴¹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 167: “Paul is again piling up words in order to hammer home the truth that Christ, and Christ alone, is the source of every conceivable bit of spiritual knowledge worth having.”

⁴² Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 169: “This verse is the christological high point of the letter. It does not match the ‘hymn’ of 1:15–20 for exalted language in reference to Christ, but it expresses beautifully and compactly the cutting-edge christological point that is Paul’s driving concern: Christ is the one in whom is to be found *all* that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life pleasing to God.”

⁴³ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 171: “They are ‘hidden’ in Christ in the sense that they are ‘treasures’ that have been deposited in him and are now stored up in him. Anyone who comes to know Christ by faith can draw from his store all the wisdom and knowledge that exists.”

⁴⁴ AUGUSTINE: “Herein is all the worth of grace, by which he saves those who believe, containing in itself deep treasures of wisdom and knowledge and steeping in faith the minds which it draws to the eternal contemplation of unchangeable truth.” Quoted in Gorday, ed. *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. ACCS, 26.

And to that you might say, **“It’s a good thing that Christ gave us the church.”** To which I would respond by saying, **“Amen!”** **What a sad state of affairs if you showed up at church on Sunday morning and it was just you there to worship God and grow as a disciple. That would be disheartening.**

Notice also that mature in Christ involves reaching “all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery.” Wow! What is that? That is a gospel-saturated investment in the Scriptures so that you know and understand God’s mystery of salvation which is Christ.

Al Mohler was talking this week in his podcast about the lack of Biblical literacy on college campuses.⁴⁵ And he said that there are students at Princeton University who when their professor referenced the Ten Commandments asked, “What are the Ten Commandments?”

The irony of this is that Princeton University was established as an institution of higher education to perpetuate the knowledge of God and the Scriptures in this world. They have failed in that mission.

I heard once from a Christian influencer who was being interviewed by a group of reporters and he said something to the effect of “As Paul says in the New Testament, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” And the reporters were like, “Who’s this Paul? What’s that book? Where can I get a copy of what he’s written?” And he was like, “The Bible. You know the highest selling book of all time!”

Now, that’s the world of college campuses and modern-day media reporters today. May that’s to be expected. But that’s not to be expected here in Christ’s church. We are men and women of the Book. We have full access to “all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery.” **And Bible literacy is something we should all be striving for, whether you’ve been a Christian for six weeks, six months, six years, or six decades.**

We are continually reaching for all “the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ.” **What does that look like for a disciple? What does that look like for someone who wants to be mature in Christ Jesus? You read the Bible. You pray to God. You explore the depths of Scripture. You go to church. You go to small group. You learn from other people. And wouldn’t you know it, when you do that your assurance of salvation grows. Your confidence in Christ grows. Your maturity as a Christian grows. It’s shocking but true!**

I talk to people sometimes and they say, “I’m having a hard time. I’m questioning my own salvation.” And assuming they know the gospel, I ask them, “Are you going to church?” “No.” “Are you reading your Bible?” “No.” “Are you praying to God?” “No.” “Are you spending time with believers?” “No.” No wonder you have no assurance!⁴⁶

And then here’s the kicker. I ask them, “Are you having sex with someone you’re not married to?” “Yes.” “Are you indulging your flesh in sinful ways?” “Yes.” Of course you are struggling with assurance in a situation like that. Because you are not exploring and chasing after the riches of Christ, you are exploring and chasing after the riches of this world. And the riches of this world aren’t that rich! They aren’t that satisfying. Not ultimately.

I mean, sin is fun. I’ll be the first to tell you that. But it’s not lasting. It’s not ultimately satisfying.

And let me say this to the disciples in the room. Paul was struggling in this. Look again at verse 1.

¹*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you*

He was struggling so that the hearts of the Colossians and the Laodiceans would be encouraged. Struggle. Struggle. Struggle. The struggle is real. The suffering is intense.

This is where the Navy SEAL metaphor breaks down a little bit. Because the suffering is borne more on the shoulders of the discipler than the disciple. Both struggle, don’t get me wrong. But the discipler

⁴⁵ Albert Mohler, “The Briefing — May 22, 2026,” *AlbertMohler.com*, May 22, 2026, <https://albertmohler.com/2026/05/22/briefing-5-22-26/>

⁴⁶ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 90: “People often express to me doubts about their salvation, even though they have read books on assurance. Their primary problem is not a lack of knowledge, but a failure to apply the truths they know. Truth that finds solid footing in a strong heart and works itself out in love of fellow believers results in deep conviction. That is the basis for assurance.”

struggles more. Paul is making a point of that here. He has suffered for the sake of the church. He has suffered so that they may be encouraged in their spiritual growth and development.⁴⁷

And as part of that struggle... as part of this role as a minister and a discipler... Write this down as a fifth and final point in your notes. If we are going to present others mature in Christ,

5) There will be **warnings** (2:4–5)

Look at **verse 4**:

⁴*I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.*⁴⁸

Plausible arguments? Plausible arguments like what? Plausible arguments like, **“Jesus wasn’t really God in the flesh, because flesh is corrupt and evil. God wouldn’t do that!”**

And plausible arguments like, **“Jesus is great, but if you really want to be in God’s good graces, you need to embrace a more austere form of righteousness and asceticism. That’s when God’s power is really unleashed in your life. Christ is good, but Christ plus some other thing is even better!”**

And plausible arguments like, **“Faith in Christ is great. It’s great. I’m all for it. But faith in Christ has to be mingled with works for salvation. No works, no salvation. You’ve got to *earn* it.”** To people who are not strong in their theology and strong in the Scriptures, arguments like these seem plausible. And there are people are out there to delude you. That was true in Colossae 2,000 years ago; that true in our day!

Whenever the JWs come to my door, their arguments sound *plausible*. They’ve got their arguments down to a science. I actually admire them. They train like crazy for their “evangelistic efforts.” And they can tie you up in knots.

I told someone the other day, “Arguing with a Jehovah’s Witness feels like trying to nail Jello to the wall.” Every time you say something true, they wiggle out of it and move onto something else. And they hit you with this barrage of ideas. It’s incredibly frustrating. Be forewarned, Christian.

Look at **verse 5**.

⁵*For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit,*⁴⁹ *rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness*⁵⁰ *of your faith in Christ.*⁵¹

There’s nothing more satisfying for a discipler than seeing a disciple grow in their faith. In fact, let me say it stronger than that—I live for that!

⁴⁷ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 83–4: “If someone were to ask you to suggest the most important qualities a minister can possess, you might argue for intelligence, education, leadership ability, boldness, holiness, or speaking ability. Although all those are essential components, perhaps the most necessary ingredient in the life of any minister of Jesus Christ is love for the church. No one can truly serve God in the church without that motivation.”

⁴⁸ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 172: “The theology, and especially the high Christology, of 1:1–2:3 has, then, a direct practical purpose: to keep believers from being deceived by *fine-sounding arguments*. This phrase translates a single Greek word (*pitthanologia*), which has a neutral meaning, ‘plausible arguments’ (ESV); ‘persuasive argument’ (NASB). But the context here obviously requires a negative connotation, such as is reflected in the TNIV (see also RSV, ‘beguiling speech’; NJB and NAB, ‘specious arguments’; NET, ‘arguments that sound reasonable’).”

⁴⁹ Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 173: “In this verse he meets another objection: his physical absence from Colossae. What gives Paul the right, under house arrest in Rome and far removed from the Colossians, to warn and rebuke them? The answer is his presence with them ‘in spirit.’”

⁵⁰ MacArthur, *Colossians*, MNTC, 91–2: “*Taxis* (good discipline [ESV: ‘good order’]) and *stereōma* (stability [ESV: ‘firmness’]) are both military terms, perhaps suggested by Paul’s close contact with Roman soldiers during his imprisonment (cf. Acts 28:16; Phil. 1:13). *Taxis* refers to a line of soldiers drawn up for battle, whereas *stereōma* refers to the solidity of a formation of soldiers. Taken together, they express Paul’s joy that individually and collectively the Colossians were standing firm against the attacks of false teaching.” Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC, 174: “Paul is like a general, inspecting his troops and rejoicing to see that they are displaying the disciplined formation (*taxis*) and strong force (*stereōma*) that they will need to fight the false teachers. Interpreting the words in this fashion makes for good preaching, but it is dubious lexicography. Both terms do, indeed, occur as technical military terms, but they also occur much more widely in the general sense simply of ‘order’ and ‘firmness.’”

⁵¹ JOHN CALVIN: “He commends their faith because of its constancy and steadfastness, meaning that it is an empty shadow of faith when the mind wavers and vacillates between various opinions.” Quoted in Graybill, *Philippians, Colossians: New Testament*. RCS, 172.

In fact, let me say it even stronger than that. I don't know how many years I have left on planet earth. If God gives me five more years or fifty years, I want to spend that time making disciples. I don't know if I'll write books. I don't know if I'll be able to continue travel and do missions. I'll do that as long as I can. I've already given up playing basketball. My #1 focus from now until God calls me home is disciple-making. I want to do it again and again and again and again until God calls me home.

And thankfully, that's not just a personal thing. This is a corporate thing. This is the mission of Messiah Bible Church—We live to make disciples... again and again and again. More disciples. Better disciples. More disciple-making. More disciplers! More people presented mature in Christ! We are selling out for this! God help us with that! May God give us the grace to keep doing this.

A wise person said this many years ago. Tell me if you've heard this before. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18–20). That's so good, it should be in the Bible somewhere.

And to that you might say, **"What about the warnings? You said, 'If we are going to present others mature in Christ, there will be warnings.' Warnings about what? What did Paul have to warn the Colossians about."** Good question. Come back next week, and I'll tell you more about that. In fact, come back the next several weeks and we'll talk about these warnings and these "plausible arguments."

I'll close with this. Last week I was in Germany preaching and leading a marriage seminar for a former student of mine at Moody. He pastors a church in Niedernberg right outside of Frankfurt, Germany.⁵² And while I was there, I got to see some famous sites for one of my heroes, Martin Luther. We went to Worms, we went to Wartburg Castle, and we went to Wittenberg.

Full disclaimer—Luther was not a perfect man. But he accomplished amazing things for the Lord. Here's a picture of him nailing the famous 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. We saw that church. We saw the place where he did this 500+ years ago launching the Protestant Reformation.⁵³



And it was a strangely familiar picture, because here's a picture of me leading the marriage seminar in Germany.



The resemblance is uncanny. I was presenting my 95 theses on how to have a godly marriage.

⁵² The name of the church is EFG (Evangelisch-Freikirchliche Gemeinde) Niedernberg: <https://efg-niedernberg.de/>

⁵³ For more on Luther, see the excellent biography by Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World* (Viking, 2017). Also see Herman Selderhuis, *Martin Luther: A Spiritual Biography* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017). A great overview of Luther's life and ministry is also given by John Piper in his biographical message, "Martin Luther: Lessons from His Life and Labor," 1996 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors, 01-30-96: <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/martin-luther-lessons-from-his-life-and-labor>

But anyways, I'll leave the last word for this sermon with Dr. Martin Luther. Luther writes, "The Christian ... endures all things, not in order to be justified or saved by them, since by faith he already has all things and is already saved, but in order that he may serve and benefit his neighbor in all that he does... Therefore, just as our heavenly Father has freely helped us in Christ, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become to the other a sort of Christ, so that we may be Christs to one another, and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians."⁵⁴

What Luther describes there is not unlike what Paul says in Colossians 1:24, "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." In imitation of Christ, we die to ourselves for the benefit of others. That is ministry. That is discipleship. To use Luther's word, that is neighborly love.⁵⁵ That is Christian ministry. The struggle is real. The rewards are great.

⁵⁴ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Luther's Works*, vol 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 371.

⁵⁵ From what I understand, Luther coined a word in German to capture this idea of neighborly love—Nächstenliebe (literally: "next-one-love").