

98-09-18b Colossians

We're back from our break now and resuming our study in Colossians 1:24, where Paul says, I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of his body, which is the church. You will remember, especially since I reviewed it in the last lesson, that Paul is writing, where is Paul when he writes this letter? He's way over in Rome in prison, right? Epaphras makes the long trip from the Lycans Valley all the way over to Rome and winds up getting in prison for a while himself with Paul before he can return, but he's many, many miles distant. If you remember back when we were covering the introductory material for this study, Paul had never been personally to Colossae.

Most of these people he has never seen in the flesh. Epaphras was a convert from when Paul was down at the other end of the valley ministering in Ephesus and so forth, Laodicea. So he's never been to Colossae and most of these people he doesn't know.

Now let me ask you this, with that in mind, read verse 24 again and do you find anything strange at all? Paul is in Rome. These people are in Philemon's house in Colossae. What's the very first statement that Paul makes? He says, I now rejoice in my sufferings for you.

Now in what sense is Paul in prison in Rome suffering for the believers in Colossae? He says, I rejoice in my sufferings for you. Well, you will remember last time that in looking at these statements by Paul, we reminded ourselves that he is an apostle and there are some unique characteristics belonging to the office of apostleship. We know from Ephesians chapter 4 verse 11 that apostleship is one of the gifts that Christ gave to the church.

He gave some apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the saints, for the work of the ministry, building up the body of Christ and so forth. And I attempted to convince you last time that there are things that are unique. The commission in Matthew 28, 19 that is often called the Great Commission and is often cited at the very center of the mission statements of most Christian organizations and many denominations and churches.

It is often held up to be the statement that defines the purpose for our lives as believers to go into the world and make disciples of all nations. Most of you have heard me digress on that particular point at some length. I will not do so again.

But I think we at least suggested last time that this is something that Jesus spoke to his disciples who would be the apostles. He specifically took the 11 remaining disciples after Judas' departure, took them to Galilee, to a high mountain, there's only the 11 of them there, and then he speaks these words to them, you will be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the other parts of the earth you find in Acts chapter 1. You will go and make disciples of all nations. You will teach them to observe everything that I have commanded you.

I think it is inaccurate at best and dangerous at worst to fail to discern the difference between what Jesus charged his apostles with and what we as believers are called to. Apostles are examples for us, just as Christ is, but in the same way that when we look at the example of Christ, we recognize that there are certain aspects of Jesus' function here on earth that serve as our example and that we seek to add to that or other things that we are called to towards and give to the tables of all nations. We don't typically end up standing before kings and governors and ending up crucified.

We do not control the weather, we do not raise the dead, we do not heal the sick, but there are people who did. There are people who did stand before kings and governors, there are people who did control the weather and raise the dead and heal the sick, there are people who did all of the things that Jesus did. According to his words, you will do all the things that you have seen me do and more, Jesus said.

Who was he talking to on that occasion? Once again, it's the disciples. The disciples, the twelve, the eleven who accompanied him in his earthly ministry, and Paul as one born out of time, are in a way an extension of Jesus Christ himself, a special and unique extension. They share uniquely.

That's why one of the requirements to be an apostle was to be an eyewitness and to have been personally taught and trained by the Lord Jesus Christ. No one outside of those twelve men possesses those qualifications and has the additional qualification of having been personally called and gifted to be an apostle by Jesus Christ himself. Each one of the twelve apostles was personally in the company of, personally taught and trained, and personally called by the Lord Jesus Christ.

So that is the office or the gift of apostleship. There are exactly twelve, no more, no less. A helpful comparison you can make in this regard is, think about the origin of the nation of Israel.

Who is the nation named after? It's named after Jacob, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. But Israel is uniquely identified under twelve headings, the twelve tribes of Israel, Reuben, Manasseh, Judah, Benjamin, Gad, Simeon, Levi, and so forth. Those twelve sons of Jacob are in a way an extension of Jacob.

They are as much a part of the identification of the Israelites as Jacob himself. But the grandsons, with the possible exception of Joseph's two sons because he got the double portion and so Ephraim and Manasseh are the two tribes of Joseph. But other than that, the grandsons of Jacob don't have the standing in the nation that the sons do.

You have the sons of Levi, even down to descendants as far as Moses and Aaron are Levites. They're great, great, great grandsons of Levi. But they don't have a tribe of their own.

They don't have the standing in the nation of Israel that the twelve sons of Jacob have. The twelve sons are an extension of Jacob himself. They define what Jacob is the originator of, what

Israel is the origin of in that nation.

In the same way, Jesus Christ with his twelve apostles, they are a unique extension of his mission and his ministry, his communication of the gospel of truth. Once the twelve sons of Jacob establish their families and their dynasties and their progeny in the nation, there are no more sons of Jacob. You don't have son number thirteen and son number fourteen and son number fifteen.

The twelve are sufficient. They do what it is that God wanted done in the first generation. And everyone after that traces themselves back to one of those sons.

Even in the millennial kingdom, Israelites will know what tribe they belong to. They will know if they are Levites or if they are from the tribe of Judah or Benjamin or Reuben or Gad or Asher and so forth. In the same way, in the church age, the twelve apostles carry on and bring to a kind of completion the work that Jesus Christ began on behalf of the church.

Jesus Christ as the Messiah to Israel is a separate subject. We are talking about Jesus Christ and his ministry to the church, which really doesn't begin until the upper room, once Judas leaves. And Jesus says, I no more call you servants, I call you friends.

And he begins a whole new set of teaching for the disciples. The injunction to love, the injunction to abide in me and I in you. This is not the kind of teaching that Jesus gave on the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain.

He didn't say abide in me and let my words abide in you and so forth. These are things that he taught the disciples. This is church age truth that they will be the custodians of.

They will be the stewards of to establish the first generation of the church. And once they've done that, the apostleship function, like the first generation, Jacob's sons, will be complete. And so there are twelve and only twelve apostles, no more, no less, in the technical sense of apostles of Jesus Christ.

Paul is one of those twelve. And he has the unique function in the twelve of being the apostle to the Gentiles. That is his emphasis.

He's not exclusively an apostle to the Gentiles. He speaks to the Jews. He ministers to them.

But his emphasis, his real forte, his primary calling, is to be the apostle to the Gentiles. So we do have an interesting problem to resolve for ourselves in the New Testament Scriptures, though, because the term apostle seems to be applied to others besides the twelve. And having said what I've just said, somebody might say, well, but Sam, over in Galatians 1.19, it sounds like Paul is saying that James, the brother of the Lord, is an apostle.

It seems like over in Acts, when it's talking about Barnabas and Paul, it says he uses the term

apostles and includes Barnabas. And Barnabas isn't one of the twelve. What about over in Philippians, where Paul says Epaphroditus, he's talking to the Philippian church, and he says, Epaphroditus is your apostle.

What do we do with these? If what you say is true, then why are these other people being called apostles? Let's take a quick look at this while we're on the subject of apostleship, and then we'll move forward. Oddly enough, by answering this question for ourselves about the exact nature of apostleship, it's going to help us come to a better understanding of verse 24 here, when Paul says he's filling up what's lacking in the sufferings of Christ. The term apostle is used 29 times in Paul's writings.

Generally, you can imagine in his greetings, Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, and so forth. It's also used in the Gospels and Acts about 34 times. Luke uses it 34 times in his Gospel and in Acts.

Imagine the preponderance of those are in Acts. Turn with me to Galatians 1.19, and let's find out if James, the brother of the Lord, is in fact an apostle. If so, they're going to run out of chairs, they're going to run out of pillars to label in the kingdom.

Galatians 1.19, Paul is rehearsing his early days as an apostle, and whether or not he got his information secondhand from the other apostles, or if he received it from another source. In chapter 1 of Galatians, he talks about his encounter with Christ, coming out of Judaism. In verse 14 of chapter 1, I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me through his grace to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood. Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. When Paul received his call to be an apostle, the twelfth apostle, once again, we've talked about that ironic reversal throughout the scriptures, where the last is first and the elder serves the younger.

Which of the twelve apostles do you think is probably the greatest? It's the last, the least. Paul says, I am the least of all the apostles, but God has worked in me to a greater effect. So, the twelfth apostle winds up being perhaps the greatest.

He is certainly responsible for the greatest amount of inspired scripture. Nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went to Arabia and returned again to Damascus. Then, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter and remained with him fifteen days.

But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. This is the statement where people say, now see, Paul says, I didn't see any other apostles except James, the Lord's

brother, which seems to imply that he is being called an apostle here. But this is an awkwardness in trying to translate from Greek to English, because the I may construction here, which literally means if not or only, this is one place where I actually like what the NIV does in the translation here.

In the NIV, this says, I saw none of the other apostles only James, the Lord's brother. The idea being, I didn't see any other apostles except for Peter, and I did see James, the Lord's brother. But there is nothing in the Greek construction of this verse to base the argument on that James is being numbered as an apostle, because Paul is clearly talking about the apostles here, not using it in a loose sense.

But the I may, which literally means if not, or in some cases you translate it except, in this case, in the NIV, you have a dash and only James. The only person Paul talked to of any note besides Peter was James, the Lord's brother. But there is nothing here to directly argue that he is an apostle.

It looks that way in English, it's not that way in Greek. Let's turn to another passage. Turn back to Acts chapter 14, and let's take a look at Barnabas and see if he's an apostle.

Acts chapter 14, It happened in Iconium that they went together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke that a great multitude, both of Jews and Greeks, believed. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. This kind of reminds us of what we were talking about in the last session.

You get people who think they've got an idea of the way it ought to be, and they will poison the minds of others who don't have something solid to hang on to. That's what happens with the Gentiles here. Unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, poisoned their minds against the brethren.

Therefore they stayed there a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. What was the purpose here of God granting the grace for signs and wonders? What is the stated purpose of miracles in this context? It is to bear witness to the word of His grace. But the multitude of the city was divided, part sided with the Jews and part with the apostles.

Well, who is it that is here having the word confirmed with signs and wonders? If you look back to chapter 13, verse 1, the church that was at Antioch, there were certain prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, Now separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they sent them away.

And it is Barnabas and Saul, who is also called Paul, that are at issue in the passage we just

read. So it seems to indicate that they are both called apostles in verse 4 of chapter 14. You can also look on down in verse 14 of this same chapter, Acts 14.

The priest of Zeus brings oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. But when the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitude, crying out, Men, why are you doing these things? We are men, not gods. Don't worship us, etc.

But that seems to be a clincher there, doesn't it? When the apostles, Barnabas and Paul, heard this, they tore their clothes. Well, there are different commissioning sources for people who are sent out. We've already established that the twelve apostles proper, the office or gift of apostle, these are apostles of Jesus Christ, who accompanied Christ, who were taught by Christ, and who were directly, personally commissioned and called by Christ.

This team, Paul and Barnabas, who sent them out? God told the church, God didn't appear to Barnabas and Saul and say, you men get up and go to the place I have called you. Who does God speak to back in Acts chapter 13? Does God come to Barnabas? Does God come to Saul? The Holy Spirit said to the church, Separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So having fasted and prayed and laid hands on them, they, the church that was at Antioch, sent them.

This is a missionary team sent out by the church at Antioch. They are apostles of the church of Antioch. The term apostle is in fact used of them, but it is not to suggest that Barnabas is an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Barnabas and Saul at this point are apostles of the church of Antioch. You say, well Sam, that sounds like sort of a squirmy kind of an explanation to try to get out of Barnabas being numbered among the apostles. Well, hold that thought and turn with me to Philippians chapter 2 verse 25.

Philippians 2 verse 25. Here Paul is talking about Epaphroditus. We have to begin back up in verse 19 of Philippians 2. I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state.

So Paul is in prison. He is going to send Timothy to visit the church at Philippi, find out how they are doing so he can be encouraged. He says in verse 20, I don't have anyone like Timothy.

I have no one like-minded who will sincerely care for your state. There were probably lots of men who would be glad to go, but Paul says there is only one that has the mind that Timothy has. There is only one that has the genuine love for you that Timothy has.

That's why I want to send him. It isn't that there aren't others who aren't willing to go, but as we have been reminding ourselves, it's why you go. It's what you think when you go that counts.

Paul points that out in Timothy's case. I have no one like-minded who will sincerely care for your

state. For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus.

This is what makes service count or what disqualifies. It doesn't matter what you do. It doesn't matter how far you go.

There are missionaries who have sacrificed and sold everything they had and gone to far off countries and lived in primitive, squalid conditions for years and years and have knocked themselves out in service to the Lord, and it doesn't count. It doesn't reflect the glory of God. It doesn't bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

It is wood, hay, and stubble. Why? Because of this passage right here. They seek their own, not the things which are of Jesus Christ.

And you can be engaged in, quote-unquote, the work of Jesus Christ and still be doing it for your own reasons. But you know in verse 22, Timothy's proven character, that as a son with his father, he served with me in the gospel. Therefore, I hope to send him at once as soon as I see how it goes with me.

But I trust in the Lord that I myself shall also come shortly. Now look at verse 25. Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, my fellow worker, and my fellow soldier, but your messenger and the one who ministered to my need.

That word messenger, if you've got a new King James here, is apostle. Your apostle and the one who ministered to my need. Since he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.

What's the story here? Paul says, Epaphroditus is my brother, my fellow worker, and my fellow soldier, but he's your apostle and your minister to my need. The church at Philippi had sponsored Epaphroditus. They had sent him and said, poor Paul, he's in prison.

We don't know if there's anyone there to take care of him. Epaphroditus, here's some provisions. Here's a boat ticket.

Go minister to Paul. They sent Epaphroditus to Paul. He is their apostle.

And that's the word that Paul uses. He says, he's my fellow soldier and fellow worker, but he's your apostle. He's your representative.

You have sent him to me to minister on your behalf to me. You sent him, so he's your apostle. This is the same thing the church at Antioch did with Paul and Barnabas.

To send them forth to represent that church and minister on their behalf. So there is a kind of apostle that is an apostle, but it's distinct from an apostle of Jesus Christ, the twelve. We also find this in 2 Corinthians 8 and verse 23.

You might want to make a note of this passage just for completeness. Because here also, Paul says, he's talking about the gift that he's going to send. That the churches have contributed.

He's going to send a gift to the needy brethren. And he says this lavish gift in verse 20 of 2 Corinthians 8. Avoiding this, that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us. Providing honorable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.

And we have sent with them our brother, whom we have often proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent because of the great confidence which we have in you. And then it goes on to say, if anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker concerning you. Or if our brethren, what's the deal here? Titus and his other brethren are accompanying this monetary gift as it makes its way to the church at Jerusalem.

So when they gather this gift and take it, there's Titus and there are these brethren. He says in verse 23, if anyone inquires about Titus, he's my partner and my fellow worker concerning you. There might be a question about him because he's a Gentile.

Remember there was an issue about whether he should be circumcised or not. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ. Well again, the word messenger here is apostles.

They are apostles of the churches, they are representatives. They have been sent forth by the churches as their representatives to act on their behalf, to carry out their wishes, to be their proxy, their ambassadors. All of those ideas are wrapped up in being an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Jesus sent the twelve forth to act on his behalf, to carry out his mission, to be his representatives in teaching the word and making disciples in all nations. But in this case, these are apostles that have their commission originating in the churches. So this is our understanding of the use of the word apostle in the New Testament.

There are twelve and only twelve apostles. We recently saw this movie called The Apostle. And Robert Duvall, when he became an apostle, he was his own originating source.

He walked himself down into the creek and baptized himself. He came up and he pronounced himself to be the apostle. Well, he sent himself.

And that is actually one of the points of the movie. If you're paying attention to the subtleties there, he sort of reinvents himself and starts this church and so forth. But he's not an apostle in the sense of the twelve, nor are these other individuals who have been sent by churches.

So, having said all that, let's turn back to Philippians chapter 2 because there's something else I want to point out in this passage that will really help us out. Now that we understand that the apostles are unique representatives of Jesus Christ, acting on his behalf, in his stead, if you will,

furthering and carrying out the things that he is not there to do. The churches can't all travel and accompany that gift.

So they send a representative who's going to do that for them and is going to complete the task that they began when they collected the offering and got it together. Their representative, their apostle, is going to take the gift and bring that ministry to completion. Notice in Philippians chapter 2, in verse 25, when he's talking about Epaphroditus, he says, I consider it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus.

He's sending Epaphroditus back. He says, he was your apostle to me, he ministered to me, but he has been longing for you, in verse 26. He's homesick.

He has a heart for these individuals in Philippi. And he's distressed because you had heard that he was sick. Epaphroditus got deathly ill during his stay with Paul, and nigh unto death.

Verse 27, Indeed he was sick almost to death, but God had mercy on him, and not only on him, but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I sent him the more eagerly, that when you see him again, you may rejoice, and I may be less sorrowful. I appreciate you loaning me Epaphroditus.

He has been your apostle. He's ministered my needs. Now I'm going to send him back, and it's going to do the same thing all over again.

It will minimize my sorrow, and it will cheer you up. Isn't it a great thing to be someone like Epaphroditus? Wherever you send him, he's a blessing. Wherever you send him, he lifts up.

Even when he's sick, nigh unto death, he's a blessing. He ministers to Paul's needs, and just by showing up, he encourages Paul. When he shows back up in his home church there in Philippi, everybody's going to be encouraged.

And even Paul, who's sending him away, will be less sorrowful, knowing what a blessing he's going to be. That's a wonderful function that we can fulfill as believers to one another. Look at verse 29.

Receive him therefore in the Lord with all gladness, and hold such men in esteem. It's okay for us to notice the kinds of people who are blessings, and to appreciate them, and to thank God for them, and to pray for them, and to speed them on their way with whatever support we can provide. It's a unique gift of encouragement and of ministry that God has given the church, certain individuals.

Then look at verse 30. Because for the work of Christ, he came close to death, not regarding his own life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me. Does that have a familiar ring to it there in verse 30? He came close to death, not regarding his own life, to supply what was lacking.

This is the exact same phrase, the exact same words in Greek, that we have over in Colossians chapter 1. To fill up the deficiency, to supply what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. Here, Epaphroditus, because the whole church at Philippi can't come to Paul and minister to his needs, they send their best guy. They send their gifted encourager and minister.

They send Epaphroditus to Paul. And Paul knows that they're pining for him, and he's pining for them, because his place is really naturally with that church. He's an organic part of that local body.

And so Paul sends him back. But he says, Hold such men in esteem. Receive him with all gladness.

Because for the work of Christ, why did Epaphroditus do this? So that he would be notable, and everybody would like him, and say nice things about him in the pulpit, and write little articles about him, and so forth. It's for the work of Christ. It's for the sake of Christ.

Epaphroditus knows why he's doing what he's doing. I'm sure he loves Paul, and I'm sure he loves the people in the congregation, but his focus is on Christ. It's the work of Christ.

That's how he views it. And because of the work of Christ, he's willing to risk his life. He's willing to minister to the point of death, to go into the squalid prison environment, and be exposed to the diseases, and the hardships, and so forth.

He came close to death, not regarding his own life, to supply what was lacking in your service toward me. Now does this mean that there's some deficiency in the Philippian church? It means that this is a gap he can fill. This is a thing he can do that they're not present to do.

He can fill up. And you can see that the English here is really inadequate. Supply what is lacking doesn't really catch the sense of it.

But in these circumstances, maybe we can sort of catch the drift here. Epaphroditus is able to meet a need that the church, because of their location and their distance, can't get there to do themselves. They would love to, but they do it by proxy.

They send Epaphroditus, and he fills up this lack. They had a desire to do something on behalf of Paul, and Epaphroditus is the guy that accomplishes that. This is the idea now, when we come back to Colossians chapter 1, and we see Paul, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, rejoicing in his sufferings.

Why do you think he's rejoicing in his sufferings, and why are they for the Colossians? Even though he hasn't met most of them, and he's hundreds of miles away from them. He's an apostle. He's a representative, an extension of Jesus Christ himself.

In the same way that Jesus Christ suffered, and gave his life for the church, Paul is an extension

of that. He's a unique extension as an apostle. He's one of the twelve that are uniquely called to be that special extension of the love of Christ, and the ministry of Christ, and the communication of the word of truth that Christ initiated toward us.

Teach them to observe whatsoever things I have commanded you. This was the mission of the apostles. We're going to see this to an even greater extent.

Turn with me quickly to Ephesians chapter 3. Ephesians chapter 3, Paul says, For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, for you Gentiles. Paul says the reason I'm a prisoner is because I belong to Christ, and it's on your behalf. If indeed you've heard of the dispensation, this word is stewardship.

Same word that Paul uses in Colossians. The stewardship of the gospel, the ministry of the gospel. The stewardship of the grace of God which was given to me for you.

Paul is the extension of Christ. He has been given this unique truth about the hope of glory to communicate to the Gentiles. Jesus Christ isn't there in person to bring this wonderful message.

So Paul the apostle does it in his stead. How about by revelation he made known to me the mystery. By revelation Christ made it known to Paul.

Paul didn't get it through an intermediary. That's what we reviewed over in chapter 1 of the book we looked at earlier. Which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to whom? To his holy apostles and prophets.

That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body. Remember the study we've done on the body of Christ versus the blood of Christ? The Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body and partakers of his promise in Christ through the gospel. Of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of his power.

To me who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. To make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ. This is so reminiscent of what he's just said in Colossians 1, isn't it? And when we remind ourselves, well, these two letters traveled in the same pouch.

Written at the same time. The same thoughts were on Paul's mind. He's restating here many of the things we have in Colossians 1. Look at verse 10.

To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. What is God doing in the church? Why is this mystery of Christ in you, the hope of glory, being revealed to the church? Why do we have this opportunity and this standing? Is it just to bless us? Is that God's end purpose just to make us happy and fulfill and complete our lives? He has a greater purpose. To make known his manifold

wisdom to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

We are an object lesson. We are an illustration and an expression of the manifold wisdom of God, the manifold grace of God, the manifold love of God in the person of Christ. And this is all according in verse 11 to the eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in him.

Look at verse 13. Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. My tribulations for you.

Don't lose heart at my tribulations for you. These are a ministry of Jesus Christ. It's filling up that lack.

It's accomplishing the purpose that Christ would be accomplishing if he were here. But it's a unique ministry of the apostles that Paul is privileged to fulfill. And look at the perspective that he has.

What has happened to the attitude of selflessness and self-sacrifice that Jesus Christ expressed and manifested when he went to the cross? Did not think equality with God a thing to be held on to. He emptied himself and took on the form of a servant. Paul the apostle, the other apostles, Peter and John and the rest, are reflections of that selfless, self-sacrificing attitude.

Paul says, I'm doing these things on behalf of Christ. It's a privilege. It's a gift.

It's my wonderful calling and opportunity to do these things on your behalf. You look around today and we don't have much of a selfless attitude. Somewhere in the transmission it has gotten lost.

How can we regain the perspective of Christ? The perspective that Paul sets as an example before us. Paul says, I'm suffering on your behalf and I'm rejoicing in it. I think this is great.

I'm sitting here in a squalid prison chained to a stinky Roman guard with no freedom. Can't go out and do the things I want to do. Can't go out and stand on the Areopagus and proclaim the gospel.

I'm stuck down here in a dank prison on your behalf and I'm rejoicing. Because he's got the perspective. The same place he starts us in Colossians, he looks at Jesus Christ.

This is a function that Jesus Christ would fulfill if he were here, but he's not. I'm his representative and I have the privilege of acting in Christ's stead. I'm his apostle.

I'm his ambassador, his representative. I have the privilege of standing in his stead and accomplishing this suffering on your behalf. Of communicating this truth on your behalf.

Of praying these prayers and struggling spiritually in the warfare on your behalf, Paul says. How can we develop that same selflessness, that same orientation to the plan and purpose of God

summed up all of the fullness in Christ Jesus? We have to start with those same small pieces of truth. Where was I before Christ came? Where am I now because of Christ? Why did Christ do what he did? What is my purpose? What is my calling in God's plan? Do I have any gratitude? Do I have any recognition of the opportunity that God has placed before me because of my life in this dispensation? That's the question we ask ourselves as we think about these passages tonight.

Let's close in prayer. We thank you, Father, for the privilege you have bestowed on us of uniting us in Christ and giving us the opportunities through your grace, through the presence of your Spirit and your Word to fulfill the high calling to which we have been called. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will cause these things to live in our souls and in our thinking and to remind us of those small and fundamental truths on which we build to eventually elevate our thinking into the realms of your very presence.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.