

## **For This I Toil!**

Colossians 1:24-2:5

**Matthew 11:28** <sup>28</sup> Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Sounds good, right?!

And yet, how many of you would say that you are experiencing this rest?

What is more, God calls us to labor in this life, and to endure much suffering.

And, on top of the normal labors and sufferings of life, Jesus calls His people to extra toil on behalf of the Church and to endure additional sufferings “for her sake.”

Instead of “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”, it often feels like, “and I will call you to more labor and more burdens.”

And yet, Jesus’ words remain true as He spoke them.

Paul has been proclaiming the greatness of Jesus Christ.

He is the One “in whom and through whom and to whom are all things.”

Even our reconciliation is “in him and through him and to him.”

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This is why it may appear odd, that Jesus calls one of his top servants to toil and suffering.

Why would He not dish out a bit more of that rest to the one he loves?

The answer is that Jesus is teaching us to love, as He loves. And love involves suffering, at least it does on this side of glory.

Read Colossians 1:24 - 2:5.

24        Now  
          I rejoice  
              in my sufferings  
                  for your sake,

Paul speaks of those sufferings related to his service to God's people.

If he were not in the ministry, he could reduce the amount of suffering he had to endure.

In other words, his yoke was heavier, because he was obeying Christ.

And yet, Paul says that he rejoices in his sufferings for them. How should we understand Paul here?

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On the one hand, we should not take Paul to mean that feelings of joy always overwhelmed the pain of suffering. His rejoicing does not eliminate the feeling of suffering altogether.

The experience of suffering remains suffering. It is difficult. It is unpleasant.

When I was working construction in Dayton, OH, I remember a fellow Christian coworker who hit his thumb with a hammer. His reaction was not one of pain, but of joy. It was like someone had just given him a kiss. Maybe, he was just trying to get control of himself. But I remember thinking to myself, "What a nut!" Maybe you don't want to let out a list of cuss words, but there is nothing wrong with expressing the feeling of pain!

We can do something similar with this verse, thinking that it means that we must always go through life as if no amount of pain ever affects us. It is not a failure to rejoice in your suffering to admit that you are struggling.

Listen to what he writes in 2 Cor. 11.

**2 Corinthians 11:25-28** <sup>25</sup> Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup> on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger

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from false brothers; <sup>27</sup> in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Paul endured all sorts of suffering. No amount of spirituality removed the effects of that burden. And it was a burden that was placed upon him by Jesus Christ, his Master.

To rejoice in suffering is making a willful choice to not run from the suffering, but rather to embrace it as good.

**Hebrews 12:2** <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Paul follows the example of Christ. Jesus endured suffering in His mission to redeem us.

Paul sees himself as continuing the mission of Jesus. Therefore, He sees purpose and meaning in the suffering of the ministry. And so, he does not shrink from it. He continues to step into the waters of suffering, knowing that it is suffering to which His loving Master has called him.

When you love someone, you willingly, even gladly, labor for them. And you embrace suffering on their behalf.

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When God was explaining to Ananias that He had called Paul into the faith, he also tells him that Paul would have to suffer “for the sake of His name.”

**Acts 9:15-16** <sup>15</sup> But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. <sup>16</sup> For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

It is the Church who bears the name of Jesus.

Jesus called Paul to suffer, not as punishment for past wrongs, but as a continuation of His work of redeeming His Church.

Paul was called to suffering in a unique way. He was special as the Apostle to the Gentiles.

But Paul’s endurance of suffering does apply to all who desire to labor as a minister of Christ.

And it also helps us to see that all ministry in the Church, by any member of the Church, will be difficult.

Any time one person takes upon himself the burden of helping another person to know Christ, it will involve labor and toil and suffering. But it is a suffering that is willingly embraced with joy.

It is Paul’s theology that enabled him to rejoice in the suffering.

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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,

Theologians have written much on trying to define how Christ's afflictions could be lacking.

And how Paul's sufferings could be seen as "filling up" what is lacking in Christ's afflictions.

Paul is not speaking about the suffering of Christ's death on the cross as payment for our sin. Hebrews is clear that no further payment is necessary to cleanse us from all our sin.

**Hebrews 10:12** <sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,

So, Paul cannot mean that in terms of our atonement for sin Jesus' suffering was lacking.

Instead, Paul is thinking of Jesus' suffering as a minister of God's grace.

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In addition to bearing God's wrath, Jesus endured many trials as he reached out to a people lost in sin.

In order to save us, Jesus came near to us. And coming near to us involved entering into the muck of our lives.

Rather than avoiding the challenges of ministry, Jesus gladly embraced them.

How often in the Gospels do we see Jesus patiently bearing with His disciples as they struggled to learn the lessons he taught them?

**Matthew 17:17** <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered, "O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."

**John 14:9** <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Add to this the countless inconveniences that Jesus endured to walk among the people he served.

**Matthew 8:20** <sup>20</sup> And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

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Why did Jesus not have better accommodations? Because he was coming near to the poverty of the people He was redeeming.

Jesus gladly endured many types of suffering in His ministry to His people.

And, Paul believed that his ministry to the Gentiles was a continuation of Jesus' work.

**John 14:12** <sup>12</sup> "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.

And with the works of ministry would come the pain of ministry.

And so Paul writes:

in my flesh  
I am filling up what is lacking  
in Christ's afflictions  
for the sake of his body,  
that is, the church

Paul's thinking is profound. Engage in the work of building up the Church, and you will add suffering to your life.



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But those who understand that they are “filling up what is lacking” in the suffering of Christ, will continue to serve the Church, even with rejoicing.

Suffering is not an unfortunate side effect of ministry. It is God’s design. It is His way of fulfilling what Jesus began.

25 of which(the Church) I became a minister  
according to the stewardship from God  
that was given to me for you,  
to make the word of God fully known,  
26 the mystery  
hidden for ages and generations  
but  
now revealed to his saints.

Paul sees himself as a minister of the Church. The word he chooses is diaconos, or deacon, meaning servant. But the type of service in which he engages is one of a steward.

He is an overseer, a manager, of the house of God. And his primary task is to “make the word of God fully known”.

This task is more than teaching facts of the Bible. The Scribes and Pharisees did that. And yet, Jesus spoke His harshest criticism to them.

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**Matthew 23:15** <sup>15</sup> Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

**John 5:39-40** <sup>39</sup> You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, <sup>40</sup> yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

So, when Paul says that it is his task to make the “word of God fully known”, he is speaking of making Christ fully known.

Notice that God is revealing Jesus “to his saints.”

Jesus never intended to make himself known only to a few Apostles, or to monks in monasteries. Jesus came to reveal himself to all His people, all His body, all His saints... you... his holy ones.

And His purpose is not to make himself “partially” known. His purpose is to make himself “fully known.”

This is the task for which Paul is a steward.

<sup>27</sup> To them (the Church)

God chose to make known

how great among the Gentiles

are the riches of the glory of this mystery,

which is Christ in you,

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the hope of glory.

Paul was particularly called to minister to the Gentiles. Much of his ministry is making sure that they knew that they were not 2<sup>nd</sup> Class citizens.

They were latecomers on the pages of God's history of redemption, but they did not receive the "leftovers" of Christ.

Paul wanted to make sure that the Gentile believers knew that they were equal partakers of the "riches of the glory of Christ".

It was not only to the Jews that Jesus came and dwelt. Jesus would dwell in the heart of anyone who believed in Him.

Paul taught the glorious riches of "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Often Paul will speak of our being "in Christ". But here says that Christ is "in you."

You know this. Sort of. But I think the profoundness of this reality still escapes us.

Why do I say this? One reason is that we still largely think of ourselves in terms of our separation from Christ as sinners. How difficult is it to think of yourself as "a holy one"?

But that is who you are?

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God would not dwell in the Temple before it was consecrated as holy.

And neither would he dwell in you, except that you have been made holy.

And it is reality of Christ dwelling in us that gives us a sure hope that we will experience glory.

By glory, we mean that we will be made perfect in holiness in our nature and character.

This hope comes from the knowledge that we are in constant contact with the One who is truly holy.

His holiness united with us, frees us from being a slave to sin and makes us a slave to righteousness.

Of course, this transformation is slow. It is lifelong really. But that does not matter. Because we are confident that God will complete the work that He has begun in us.

I was asked this week as to what I thought was the central theme of the book of Colossians. There are several good answers to this question. But, if I had to choose, I think it would be "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Not the hope of going to a place called glory...

Not the hope of seeing glory...

But the hope of being made into glory.

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“Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Working towards your experience of glory is the work of the ministry.

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

Pau’s goal is to present “everyone who bears the name of Christ” mature in Christ.

Another way to translate “mature” is “perfect or complete”.

Ministry is like parenting. You have a newborn baby that you are trying to feed and nourish and train into adulthood. And seeing Christians become fully conformed to the image of Christ is painful.

The path to maturity is more than laying out the do’s and don’ts of the Christian life. Of course, God does give us dos and don’ts. The 10 Commandments are still binding upon us today. But if presenting God’s rules is all there is to becoming perfect, then

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the Mosaic law would have produced better results. Israel's failure is a warning to us.

Spiritual maturity occurs as Christ becomes larger in our thinking. Our biggest problem is that we have little thoughts of Christ. We think of Him as less than He really is. And we think less of what He is capable of doing in us. We are convinced by our present failures are an indication of Christ's weakness. We want immediate victory and because it has not yet happened, our thoughts of Christ shrink.

I think this can be illustrated using a Russian doll.

You know, the doll that opens up and inside is another doll, only a bit smaller. And when you open up this second doll inside you find another doll, only even smaller. And inside that another doll, until you get to this tiny doll in the very middle.

As you struggle with the depths of your sin, your view of Christ can get smaller and smaller, like the Russian doll. In your mind, Christ has become smaller.

Paul wants the reverse to happen.

I like to think of it as the Russian doll with a twist of Harry Potter.

One of the images in Harry Potter was that of a tent. On the outside of the tent it looks normal. Maybe 8 feet square. But as

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you entered into the tent, on the inside it was this huge and wonderfully furnished. Much larger than what is seen from the outside.

Picture another Russian doll again. Only this time, every time you open a doll, the one inside is larger than the one before. This is your Jesus. Your struggles can make Jesus smaller and smaller in your mind. This is the challenging and testing of faith.

But as you meditate upon Jesus portrayed on the pages of Scripture, He becomes larger and larger.

Paul's passion is to proclaim Christ. Through his proclamation of Christ, he is correcting the faulty thinking of his hearers. He is instructing them to think thoughts of Christ in line with who Christ is.

And it is not only that Christ is great "out there". Christ's greatness is growing "in here". (Point at my heart).

**John 16:33** <sup>33</sup> I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Jesus has overcome the world to present you to Himself "perfectly complete."

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Now you begin to see Paul's concept of ministry.

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

For this I toil...

Paul is struggling...

Paul is laboring...

Paul keeps pressing on when he wants to quit...

Why?

Because he believes! He believes that he is toiling for what Jesus is toiling.

In fact, Jesus is supplying the energy for the toil.

This does not mean that Christ is a motor attached to us and we no longer have to paddle. No, He is giving us the determination, even with failing muscles, to keep paddling. And the powerful energy does not always feel all that powerful. It is not like Popeye, who when he ate his spinach he was given such strength that he could do superhuman things. The truth is that when Christ's energy empowers us, we still feel exhausted at times.



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God could make it easier, but then we would not be following in the footsteps of Christ. It was not easy for Him as He walked the earth. Because He suffered, we too will toil and suffer.

Listen to Paul in verse 1 of chapter 2.

### **ESV Colossians 2:1**

For 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,

The struggle is real. It is agonizingly great.

God is giving Paul energy, but that does not mean that the toil is less.

The conflict is engaged in the spiritual realm and in the physical realm.

The physical struggles are things like being cast into prison and being mocked and beaten.

But the spiritual struggles were just as real. Paul wrestled with those forces in prayer for the people to whom he ministered.

Spiritual fatigue is a real thing.

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Experiencing anxiety and frustration and disappointment as people are slow to grow to maturity.

Getting the Gospel right: not falling into what we call “easy believism” on the one hand, but also not falling into “legalism” and “self-righteousness” on the other.

Wrestling to know how to lead people to Christ, to the greatness of Christ, and to help them believe that it is this Christ who is working in them. You see, it is easy to heap burdens on people, to tell them how they fall short. But it is much more difficult to give them courage to stay in the fight, to not lose confidence that Christ will not leave them in their sin, but will indeed carry them all the way to glory.

Paul agonizes (the Greek word)...

2           that their hearts may be encouraged,  
                  being knit together in love,  
                  to reach all the riches  
                  of full assurance of understanding  
                  and  
                  the knowledge of God's mystery,  
                  which is Christ,  
3           in whom are hidden all the treasures  
                  of wisdom  
                  and

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knowledge.

Fighting to encourage God's people to remain fixed on Christ. This is what encourages the saints.

God's people need to know that their struggling will not be in vain.

They need to know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. They need to be reminded that Jesus really is big, bigger than the problems they are facing.

He is laboring to encourage them to continue in the faith, to not quit in the journey. He is constantly trying to help them not lose sight of their destination, to reach all the riches of Christ.

If you are going to keep fighting in the Christian life, you have to first believe that Jesus is able to win the fight.

Paul wants the Colossians to have greater confidence that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ alone.

He wants them to be fully assured that they are missing nothing if they have Christ.

Having a confidence that there is nothing outside of Christ, they will have courage to continue clinging to Jesus Christ.

This encouragement is not something that Paul alone will give.

The Church is a body that is knit together in the love of Christ.

He expects that encouragement will also occur between the members of the body.

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We do not yet have all Christ in our current understanding. But we must be confident that in Christ alone are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

As a pastor, I am concerned for your faith. The worst sort of discouragement is when you begin to doubt whether the Gospel will really work for you.

It is so gut-wrenching when you see a person's faith begin to erode.

The world is full of mocking and arguments against your continuing to believe in Christ.

Beware of your heart beginning to believe those arguments.

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

In the clear light of day, to stray from Christ in any way, is foolishness.

But we do not always live in the clear light of day.

Some days a fog will descend upon us. We will struggle to see the hand in front of our face.

And in the haze of this world, the arguments to leave Christ, or add to Christ, seem plausible.

The arguments against Christ are well-crafted.

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They have the ring of truth.

If Jesus is so great, why is the Church so full of hypocrites?

If Jesus is so great, why has He not conquered all of the evil of my old nature?

Who wrote the Bible anyway? Was it not men? Maybe the Bible is nothing more than the wishful thinking of men.

If faith alone in Christ alone is the Gospel, why is it that so many people who say they believe bear so little fruit?

And if God loves me, why does he allow me to go through so many struggles in life and in the depths of my soul?

The arguments are endless. And they are specific to you. And they will appear plausible to you. They will appear persuasive to you.

Satan is like a spider who knows where to place his web and how to weave his web of lies to catch you personally.

And the waves of deception keep rolling in. God's grace enables you to stand against the surf, but soon after you pop your head through one wave, another takes its place. The attacks against your soul seem to never end.

This is the labor of a minister of the Gospel.

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The minister must himself wrestle with the truths of the Gospel. It is more than learning academics. He must embrace the truths in the depths of his soul. They must become a part of who he is.

And then he must work to impart those truths to the rest of the body. Patiently instructing, because he knows that they too must wrestle with the same truths that raging within his own soul.

And as he bears with the doubts of those he loves, he must watch that his own confidence is not then shaken. All the while, he must be humble enough to discern which truths are grounded in the words of the Bible and which are only ideas of his own making.

For any who thinks that this struggle is easy, you have not borne this burden yourself.

This labor to know Christ is not only the struggle of pastors ordained to the task.

It is the labor of every member of the Church.

Every member influences someone else.

You have conversations. You speak forth your own ideas.

And your ideas influence others in the body.

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You are either leading people to a more firm faith in Christ. Or you are giving plausible arguments that will lead them away from Christ.

Paul is warning the Colossians about ideas that are growing up in the hearts of members of the church. He is not warning of outside heresies.

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

Toil... suffering... agonizing struggle...

This is the ministry. It is not only pastors who are called to this. We are all called to love the Church, to love those who come after us.

We are all called to “fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ”.

We are all called to encourage someone to remain firm in their faith in Christ.

Christ really is more than you could ever imagine.

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And Christ really does dwell in you by faith alone.

And because He dwells in you, He will make you perfect and complete in Him.

You will reach glory. You will reach your eternal rest.

Amen!

Communion: Christ in you! The hope of glory!

**1 Thessalonians 5:23-24** <sup>23</sup> Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup> He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.