



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

Completing Christ’s Afflictions

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In view of our recent focus on balanced teaching about Jesus ([here](#), [here](#)), a point of emphasis discovered in preparation to teach a text from Colossians arrested my attention. The passage begins at Colossians 1.24, a verse we may gloss over as we focus on Paul’s exalted statements about Christ and his warning about a human philosophy. In the order of the Greek phrases, the verse says, “Now I rejoice in the sufferings on your [plural] behalf and I am filling up what is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh on behalf of his body, which is the church” (my translation).

N. T. Wright succinctly asks the question with which commentators wrestle: “How can there be anything lacking in the sufferings of Christ?” (Wright 1986, 87). But in light of his statements about Christ’s nature and work to reconcile and present God’s people as holy (1.15–22), Paul cannot mean anything was lacking from Christ’s redemptive sufferings. In fact, the entirety of the section beginning at verse 24 confirms that his focus is on his own afflictions, not the redemptive sufferings of Christ. He saw suffering as integral to the fulfillment of his “commission” (οἰκονομία, *oikonomia*) as God’s “servant” (διάκονος, *diakonos*) (v. 25 CSB). As he elaborates on what is entailed in remaining steadfast and stable in the faith (1.23), Paul uses multiple words with similar meanings: “sufferings” (πάθημα, *pathēma*; 1.24), “afflictions” (θλίψις, *thlipsis*; 1.24), “toil” (κοπίαω, *kopiaō*; 1.29), “struggling” (ἀγωνίζομαι, *agōnizomai*; 1.29), and “struggle” (ἀγών, *agōn*; 2.1).

In stressing his suffering in Colossians 1.24–2.5, Paul restates an idea he elaborates elsewhere (cf. Rom 8.17; 2 Cor 1.5–6; 4.10–12; Phil 2.19). Indeed, in one text, which, because of the predominant way the church has used the word “fellowship,” may be jarring to modern believers, he says he wants to participate in “the *fellowship* of his sufferings” (κοινωνίαν τῶν παθημάτων, *koinōnian tōn pathēmatōn*; Phil 3.10; cf. 1 Pet 4.13).

The idea that suffering service is integral to our calling as disciples traces back to Jesus. To consider only selected texts from one of the Gospels, we begin with Mark 8.31–38 where Jesus responds to Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ” (v. 29), by announcing his impending suffering and calling his disciples to self-denial and cross-bearing. Verse 31’s prediction of suffering (πάσχω, *paschō*; cf. *pathēma*, Col 1.24) is the first of three in Mark (cf. 9.30–32; 10.32–34). Immediately after the third, James and John approach Jesus to ask for prominent power positions in his kingdom. In reply, he introduces the subject of suffering service, asking if they are willing to share his “cup” and “baptism.” He asks that question in light of his emphasis on the menial

service that both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures considered undignified (Inrig 1983, 336–337). When the other ten express their indignation at the brothers’ request (v. 41)—one suspects they were angry the siblings got there first—Jesus says they must reject the world’s view of self-development in favor of his reign’s inverted values. “Whoever would be great among you must be your *servant* [*diakonos*], and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be *served* but to *serve* [διακονέω, *diakoneō*], and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10.43–45).

In Mark 10, Jesus establishes a vital aspect of the “image” (εἰκών, *eikōn*; 2 Cor 3.18; cf. Col 1.15) disciples are to emulate. But, as David Garland has observed, it is as out of step with our world as *diakonia* was with theirs: “Today, most people view pain and suffering as a curse.... In today’s world we expect people to rejoice in their accomplishments, their blessings, their health and wealth. Consequently, Paul’s rejoicing over his suffering jolts a worldview that values comfort and ease as the highest good” (Garland 1998, 127).

We expect as much; the world will think and do what the world thinks and does. What we should ask is whether the image we project as Christ’s body is different from the world’s. Do we project the well-rounded image of Jesus we see in Scripture or selectively accommodate our own comfortable values? Which texts about Jesus and his way do we repeatedly emphasize? Which do we never teach? What are the dominant messages of the songs that comprise our weekly repertoire? What biblical themes are never featured in our teaching and admonition (cf. Col 3.16)? As we think about imitating Paul as he imitated Christ (1 Cor 11.1), are we teaching and living as he did?

It matters, for “he understood that his apostleship involved ‘work to be done and sufferings to be borne if the body of Christ is to be built up and the life of Christ to be diffused to new members’” (Garland 1998, 128; citing Ahern 1960, 28).

Works Cited

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