Lessons from a Life in ministry

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[0:00] Let's read together from the New Testament, Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, verses 24 to 29.!

To them 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. And for this I toil, struggling with all His energy, that He powerfully works within me. This is God's holy word.
Turn this evening to that passage that Corey read for us, Colossians chapter 1, and from verse 24 to the end of the chapter at verse 29. A number of years ago, I was tasked with running an in-service training course for free church ministers. I did this for about five or six years. And part of that role involved me, along with others, choosing, inviting various speakers, and selecting the kind of subject matter that they would cover in the course. And one of the topics we frequently chose to cover was presented under the title, Lessons from a Life in Ministry. An experienced pastor, minister, often retired, was invited to come and to share with younger colleagues some of the lessons they had learned over the years in full-time pastoral ministry. It was frequently, you know, a time of honesty, transparency, as these more mature ministers, I now discover that I am one of those, shared from the heart. And it's always a good thing to be able to learn from those who have gone before us in the faith and to draw on their experience of Christian life and ministry.
And in this next section of Colossians, we find the great apostle Paul doing just that. Here is Paul sharing with the Colossian believers something of his own experience and understanding of gospel ministry. You'll notice in the previous verses that Chris took us through last week, Paul speaks to the Colossians about the greatness and the glory, the supremacy and sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is all about Jesus and Jesus at the center. And at the end of that section, in verse 23, you'll notice there he urges them to continue in the faith, not shifting, he says, from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. So, Paul here describes himself as a minister or servant of the gospel. And that's the theme that he picks up, I think, in these verses before us tonight.
There may be a contrast, an inherent contrast being drawn between Paul's own ministry and that of those false teachers that had infiltrated the church in Colossae. Those false teachers, disdain, suffering, delighted in mystery, and dictated to the immature. But as we'll see, the picture that Paul paints for us here in these verses is very different to that. And while some of these lessons may be particularly appropriate for those of us in church leadership, I think they're really applicable to all of us who are in the service of the gospel. So, what are the lessons that Paul wants us to learn here about authentic Christian ministry? Let's try and pull out from the text just three threads about the work of gospel ministry. And the first thread I want you to notice, we want to pull on, as it were, is in verse 24. And we'll call this ministry and the sufferings of Christ's body. Paul begins by speaking about suffering. Now, that may seem to us, at least, an unusual theme to begin with. And certainly, Paul's perspective on suffering is different from what we might normally expect.
[5:21] There's no grumbling here or complaining from Paul. There's no bitterness. There's no anger. Quite the reverse. Remarkably, Paul speaks here about rejoicing in his sufferings. Now, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake. And in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. Now, how on earth can Paul say that he rejoices in his sufferings? Very counterintuitive. And I don't think we're to conclude here that Paul was some kind of masochist who delighted in painful experiences. But because this idea of rejoicing in suffering is one that we find elsewhere in Paul's correspondence and elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul tells, for example, the church in Philippi that his imprisonment and suffering is something that has served to advance the gospel. Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice, he says

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in Philippians 1.18.

And you'll notice here that Paul is rejoicing in his sufferings for the sake of the Colossians. And that in itself is quite strange. Because, of course, Paul has not been to Colossae.
He didn't plant this church. So, what on earth is he talking about? In what sense can he be said to have been suffering for their sake? Well, to understand what Paul is driving at here, I think we need to go back to his call to be an apostle to the Gentiles. You remember that after his experience, famous experience on the road to Dysmascus, Paul was taken to the house of Ananias. And Ananias was understandably very concerned that this man who had been persecuting and harrying the church was now to be received into his home. And we read in Acts 9, verse 15 and 16, 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. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. And Paul's sufferings, of which we read through the book of Acts and mentioned in some of his letters, were of course for the sake of the gospel. He endured much, especially from the hands of the Jews, but also from the authorities. And he did that so that the gospel would be made known among the Gentiles. Famously, he tells the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians chapter 4,
We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. Death is at work in us, but life in you. So, Paul is able to rejoice in his sufferings because they have served to spread the gospel across the Gentile world. And I think it's in this sense that his sufferings are for the sake of the Colossians. They are the tangible fruit of the sufferings he endured. If Paul had not been willing to suffer for the sake of Christ, the gospel message would have gone nowhere. The church would have simply retreated into a kind of holy huddle.
[9:29] But instead, under Paul's commitment and vibrant leadership and example, it had instead become a powerful, effective missionary force. But the interesting thing here is that Paul doesn't stop at telling the Colossians that he rejoices in his sufferings for them because he goes on to say, 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. Once again, these are difficult words to understand. What is Paul saying here? What is he implying? Is he really saying that there's something lacking or deficient in Christ's afflictions?

Is he telling us here that he has had to contribute something that Jesus lacked? Now, clearly, that is not what I think he's saying here. Remember in the previous verses, he's just spoken about the utter supremacy and sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ.
So, we must be clear, Paul is not referring here, I think, to the atoning work of Christ and his sufferings on the cross. Nothing lacking in that. That is something perfect and complete that cannot be added to or contributed to. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, as it says in Hebrews, once for all. Peter says, for Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. So, what is Paul referring to here? What are these afflictions of Christ that are lacking? Well, there is a sense in which Jesus is still afflicted and still endures suffering. If you go again back to Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, what do we read there? Well, Acts chapter 9, verses 3 through 5, as he went on his way, he approached Damascus. Suddenly, a light from heaven shone around him.
Falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And he said, who are you, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It's an astounding words. Saul is persecuting the church, but Jesus tells him that he is persecuting him. Why are you persecuting me? Jesus Christ suffers with his people? He is so closely identified with his church that there is a sense in which their sufferings are shared by him. The Lord suffers in and with his people.
[12:42] And indeed, until the day he returns, he will continue to share and bear the afflictions of his suffering church. And the idea here seems to be that there is a measure of affliction that must be borne by Christ and his church before he returns. Jesus is the suffering servant, and he continues to share in the afflictions of his people until God's purposes in this world are complete.

There is an example in the book of Revelation, Revelation 6 verse 11. The fifth seal is open. John sees a vision of the martyred saints in heaven. And we read there, then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete who were to be killed as they themselves had been. The saints are to rest until

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the number of martyrs is complete. One commentator puts it, the days on God's calendar are marked off one by one in the blood of the martyrs. The church of Jesus Christ is called to be a suffering church and to bear the afflictions of the Messiah. And this has been the ministry of the church down through the ages, to suffer and to fill up the afflictions of rejected and despised Savior. And in many senses, this is a hallmark of authentic Christian ministry, a willingness to suffer for the sake and in the name of Jesus Christ. Years ago, I remember my friend Adam speaking of a young man in his late teens, maybe 15, 16, 17, having been tortured in an Iranian prison. And the result of that torture was a long battle with anxiety and depression. Adam wrote these words. But someone may say, are not the suffering saints made of steel, spiritual giants who amidst suffering break out in songs of joy? Not often. But depression and anxiety is not a sign of spiritual weakness is not a sign of spiritual weakness, rather a daily memorial before heaven's throne as a price is paid for devotion. It is also reassuring to the rest of us that God is able to use feeble vessels, ordinary people, through whom He accomplishes extraordinary things. Friends, the church is, if I can put it this way, God's poor instrument in this world to accomplish extraordinary things. And we often forget in our cosseted lives here in the West that suffering is the lot of Christ's people all across this world tonight. There have been more Christian martyrs in the last hundred years than in the previous 1900 put together. And friends, we still belong to a suffering church. The church of Jesus Christ is still today marked by the cross, displaying Christ crucified to a dying world. And friends, we must not be ashamed of our crucified and risen Savior.

We dare not forget that we still belong to a suffering and afflicted church. Ministry and the sufferings of Christ's body. And then secondly here, ministry, and we'll call this the mystery of Christ's gospel in verses 25, 26, and 27, of which 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, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to the saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the riches of the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

So Paul continues by describing himself again. You'll notice here as a minister, a servant, he's been made a steward of the gospel for the sake of the Gentiles. His purpose has been to make the Word of God fully known. And twice in these verses, and later on in chapter 2, verse 3, he mentions this word again. He talks about the gospel as a mystery. The ancient world was full of what sometimes were called mystery religions. They promoted secret knowledge, initiation rites, promised their devotees spiritual fullness. And indeed, there may be of something of that in the teaching that had infiltrated the Colossian congregation. But while Paul employs that same word, he means something very different. In Paul's writings, the word mystery conveys the idea of something that was once hidden and secret, but is now revealed and disclosed for all to see. Paul speaks here about the mystery hidden from ages and generations, but now revealed to all the saints. In the Old Testament, the mystery of the Gentiles being gathered in and included amongst God's people was kind of hidden in plain view. Now through Paul and the stewardship given to him, that mystery has been publicly, openly revealed and declared. And it's not simply that the Gentiles that the Gentiles will be blessed in some vague way. It is that they will be fully embraced and be included among God's covenant people. The gospel is for Jew and Gentile. Both are welcomed into God's family, not based on their religious heritage, but only because of faith in Jesus Christ.

Both joined together in one new man, Jew and Gentile, in one body, the body of Christ. The glorious riches of the gospel are open to all without distinction.

[19:44] And that is always worth underscoring or underlining. Men and women, whoever they may be, from whatever background or ethnic group, are welcomed into God's church solely because of faith in Jesus Christ. Our nationality, racial identity, spiritual pedigree count for absolutely nothing.

What matters is faith alone in Christ alone. So whoever we are, and whatever our past, whatever wickedness we've committed, however lost in the far country we might be, we can all come to God and be welcomed into His people through the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is in Jesus Christ abundant mercy for sinners of whatever hue. There is grace enough for all. There is enough for you and me, because Jesus Christ is an all-sufficient Savior. I came across these words of Martin Luther, Christ our Lord is an interminable well, the chief source of all grace, truth, righteousness, wisdom, and life, without limit, measure, or end. Even if the whole world were to draw from this fountain enough grace and truth to transform all people into angels, still it would

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not lose as much as a drop. This fountain constantly overflows with sheer grace. Whoever wishes to enjoy Christ's grace, and no one is excluded, let him come and receive it from him. You will never drain this fountain of living water. It will never run dry. Here is the glorious mystery. Jesus Christ is an inexhaustible fountain of grace. He is a fountain that will never run dry. Drink from him, rest in him, be joined to him. How great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. The heart and center of this mystery, encompassing all the richness of the gospel message is summed up in this little expression, Christ in you, the hope of glory. Depending how you read it, but it's not Christ among you, or beside you, or even with you. Christ in you. Paul has just been speaking. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over creation, the one through whom all things were created, the one in whom all things hold together, the one in whom all the fullness of
God was pleased to dwell. A mind-blowing vision, really, of the cosmic Christ. Now he speaks of this Jesus as being in his people. How can this be? It's the great hope of the Old Testament being realized that God would dwell with his people, that he would be close to them. And all that hope and longing and promise of the Old Testament is fulfilled in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.
[23:28] Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. This union with Jesus Christ forged by the Holy Spirit is everything. We are loved in him, forgiven in him, accepted in him, included in him, given hope in him. Everything hinges on us being in him on us being in him. Jesus Christ must be at the center. Our faith must be in him.

Faith brings us into the life of Jesus and into all the glorious riches of his wisdom and grace so that we can draw from him all that we need for life and salvation.
There is no division between Christ's work for us and Christ's work in us. B.B. Warfield wrote, it compels us to point afresh to the primary truth that we do not obtain the benefits of Christ apart from, but only in and with his person, and that when we have him, we have all.
Let me ask you tonight, do you have Christ this evening? Do you have him in your life? Do you have him in your heart? With him you will have everything. Without him you will have nothing. Nothing that will last.
Nothing that will remain. Nothing that will stand on the day of judgment. Without him your life will remain empty. But with him you will have life in all its fullness.
[25:30] I recall the story of Dr. Ernest Kevin. He was many years ago the principal of London Bible College. And apparently he was explaining to the gospel, the gospel to a class of young children.

In his talk he used a series of wooden bricks designed so that the whole set would fit inside the largest one, each one fitting inside another. And the smallest brick he had was, had written on it, perseverance. And that fitted into a larger brick called sanctification.
In those days this was a children's talk. How time has passed, how things have changed. Christians persevere in the faith because God makes us holy. Sanctification was put inside adoption.
There's no holiness unless we belong to God and belong in God's family. Adoption then fitted inside justification. No one can be a child of God without first being made right with God. And as his talk drew to a close, there was only one brick left. Largest of them all written upon it was the Lord Jesus Christ. And as he came to his conclusion, Kevin said, and so boys and girls, you see, and those were his last words. As a small boy raised his hand and shouted out, please, sir, it's all in Christ.
And friends, that's no less true today as it was in Paul's. It's all in Jesus Christ. Christ in us, the hope of glory. I wonder if you've made that discovery for yourself.
[27:15] Ministry and the suffering of Christ's body. Ministry and the mystery of Christ's will.

And then thirdly here and briefly, because time is disappearing, ministry and the maturity of Christ's people. Verses 28 and 29. Him we proclaim. Warning everyone, teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. And then he says, for this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works in me. The great emphasis of Paul's ministry and him we proclaim.
This is the great task, to make Christ fully known. This remains the great task of Christian ministry. In our own day and generation. We are to proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul writes to the Corinthians, for what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. Here, he is always the great theme of the church's preaching and ministry. Reminded of the words of C.H. Spurgeon at the opening of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, 25th of March, 1861. He said this, I would propose that the subject of the ministry of this house, as long as

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this platform shall stand, and as long as this house shall be frequented by worshipers, shall be the person of Jesus Christ.
Him we proclaim. And you'll notice here that this proclamation of Christ involves warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom. Wrong thinking, bad behavior needs to be corrected, needs to be exposed.
People need to be brought to repentance. Christ in all his sufficiency must be taught in the church. Why is this needed? It is so that God's people may be presented mature in Christ.
[29:26] Paul clearly held to the conviction that Christian maturity is driven by a Word and Christ-centered ministry. How do we come to see mature Christian believers? We must attend to the person and work of Christ, unlocking the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are found in Him. Listen to the proclamation of God's Word. And that means we must be listeners before we're speakers. Luther, in characteristic, kind of exaggerated fashion, famously said, if you were to ask a Christian what his task is, and by what he is worthy of the name Christian, there could be no other response than hearing the Word of God.

That is faith. Ears, he says, are the only organs of the Christian. Now, Paul's great aim was to produce and present before God mature Christians, men and women who'd grown up into Christ to become more like Christ.
Christ. And he toils and works to this end as Christ works in him, not just to bring people into the kingdom, but to see them grow and mature as Christian disciples, as Corey was saying right at the beginning of the service, the great goal of Christian ministry, to see people develop and to grow up into Christ, to be mature Christian believers. How does it happen? Through Christ being preached and proclaimed and he being received by faith. It's one of the great disappointments of Christian ministry. I've been in Christian ministry for almost 40 years, not quite. Aside from being confronted by one's own faults and failings, of which there are many, is to see some Christians steadfastly remain as infants, childish and immature, utterly oblivious to their own shortcomings.
Some have been Christians for many, many years, and yet they've barely grown. They remain spiritual pygmies, development stunted, deformed by selfishness, apathy, and pride, because they refuse to let the Word of God, the Word of Christ, dwell in them richly.
Other things, it appears, have captured their hearts and shaped their lives. Yes, I know that some people like to offer shortcuts to Christian maturity. You'll hear people talk about secret or special experiences of the Holy Spirit, often as if they're some kind of quick fix. Well, in over 40 years of Christian living, I have not found those avenues to bear much fruit, because in my experience, shortcuts invariably lead away from growth and not towards it.
[32:33] The Holy Spirit's ministry is to throw light upon the Lord Jesus. The Spirit comes to bring us into a deeper relationship with Jesus, not to feed our egos or spiritual pride. It may well have been the case that in the Colossian church, there were teachers pushing a kind of spiritual elitism, deeper insights, greater knowledge.

But the gospel of Christ and the church of Christ are for all. The church must never become a playground for elitism based on a particular theology, however sound, or a particular spiritual experience, however wonderful.
We must instead continue to preach Christ and expound the Word. We mustn't waver from that, because only a Word-centered church will produce Christ-centered disciples.
There's a good reason why in our congregation here, our various meetings and gatherings, we seek to proclaim the Word of Christ and to teach and expand the Scriptures. It's why in the Free Church of Scotland, we're praying for God to raise up, what? Heralds of the gospel.
Our denomination and others in Scotland are crying out for faithful gospel preachers, men whose motto will be, Him we proclaim, Christ in all His glory.
[34:06] In the second book of the Institutes, I think it's there, Calvin writes this, For the sum of all is this, for those who seek this treasure trove of blessings of all kinds, in no one else can they be found than Him, for all are given in Christ alone.

Friends, everything we need to grow and mature is to be found in the Lord Jesus, Christ in us, the hope of glory. In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.
How we need to lay hold of Him, how we need to look to Him, trust Him, obey Him, how we need Him to be at the center. All that we need is found in Christ.
Ministry and the sufferings of Christ's body. Are you prepared to suffer for Jesus Christ? Ministry and the mystery of Christ's gospel. Are you rejoicing that Christ is in you, the hope of glory? Is the

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power and presence of Jesus effective in your life?
Ministry and the maturity of Christ's people. Are you growing up in Christ's likeness as the Word of God dwells in you richly? Are you looking to the Christ who now lives in you by His Spirit?
[35:32] Friends, don't be tempted to look elsewhere. Learn from Paul. Learn from the lessons of a life in ministry.

And keep Jesus Christ right at the center. Let's pray together. Father, grant us your grace and your mercy. And grant us the help of your Holy Spirit.
May we be knit together in your life. May we be knit together in love as your people. And may we draw from Christ all that we need to live in a way that honors and pleases you.
We thank you that in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. We pray this in His name. Amen. Amen.

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