

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Do We Fill Up Something That is Lacking in the Cross?"

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 2/21/2010

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## **Introduction**

We've now moved into the section of Colossians chapter one where the Apostle Paul takes up a new theme. As I've told you often, the overall theme of the book of Colossians is the preeminence of the Lord Jesus Christ – the fact that He demands and rightfully deserves first place in everything – from the farthest reaches of the universe, all the way down to the particulars of your own life and conduct as a believer.

Paul has told the Colossians that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Gospel, verses 1-14. There is no Gospel without the Lord Jesus Christ. He is at the center of it. The Gospel is not the Gospel, the good news it not the good news, unless it is all about the Lord Jesus Christ, and the redemption from sin that He alone has provided, full, and free and complete, through His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead.

Paul has also told the Colossians that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Creation, verses 15 through 17. Jesus Christ is the creator God himself. He has the right of ownership over each and every human being on this planet. He created everything, and He sustains everything. The creation continues to exist because of the moment-by-moment sustaining power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Paul has told the Colossians that Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Church, verses 18 through 23. The true church is the church of Jesus Christ. He is the Head of the Church, not any man. He is the Lord of the Church. Christ must have first place in the Church. Because He is the One who has reconciled us to God the Father.

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Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Gospel, Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Creation, and Jesus Christ is preeminent in the Church. And now, starting at the end of verse 23 and continuing through the end of Colossians chapter one, the Apostle Paul tells the Colossian believers that Jesus Christ is preeminent in genuine Gospel ministry. Let me read those verses for you once again:

Paul speaks of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, verse 23, "which was preached to every creature under heaven" – that is, to every kind of person and nation and culture in the known world, both Jew and Gentile – "of which I, Paul, became a minister." And then we read this, beginning in verse 24:

**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, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.**

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Paul's theme here is that if a ministry is a genuine, Biblical ministry, then Jesus Christ has first place in it. The preacher doesn't have first place. The church leaders don't have first place. The people don't have first place. The building doesn't have first place. Ritual doesn't have first place. Man-made tradition doesn't have first place. Jesus Christ and His written Word have first place. That is Paul's theme in these verses. He's telling the Colossian believers, that is how you can know for certain that my Gospel ministry is genuine, that it is of God. And that is because Jesus Christ has first place in my ministry.

### **What Paul Says**

But as we come to these verses, we immediately come upon something that brings us up short. It makes us stop and think. And if you look what Paul says here in isolation from the rest of the Word of God, you can go way off the track in your thinking about how you are saved and how you are supposed to live.

Paul says, verse 24: "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." There he says it: "I fill up...what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ." Now that is, on the face of it, a pretty startling statement. For the last 23 verses, the Apostle Paul has been saying that Jesus Christ is everything. Jesus Christ has provided a full and complete and perfect salvation. We have redemption through His blood, verse 14. He is the one who has made peace through the blood of His cross, verse 20. It is because of His death, verse 22, that we are now *positionally* holy,

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blameless, and above reproach in the sight of God. And it is because of His death that we shall be presented before the throne of God *actually* holy, blameless, and above reproach at the Last Day.

Why, then, is Paul saying that there is something “lacking” in the afflictions of Christ? What does he mean?

### **How Some Misinterpret It**

Well, before we get to the right answer, I want to tell you the wrong answer. And the wrong answer is to be found in many places today, in many churches today. In particular, you will find this wrong answer in the doctrine of the Roman Catholic church. Let me quote an official doctrinal statement of the Roman Catholic church for you:

Christ desires for us to participate in his Passion, and thus suffering within the Body of Christ has a redemptive role. Because baptized Christians are part of the mystical Body of Christ, Jesus Christ the head of the body asks its members to participate not only in his resurrection and grace, but also in the suffering of his Passion. St. Paul firmly evinces this doctrine [in Colossians chapter one, verse twenty-four]...

This does not mean that Christ’s redemption is lacking, or that his suffering was not enough for the redemption of the world. It only means that we are chosen to offer up our sufferings for the expiation of [that is,

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making a compensatory payment to God for] the temporal punishment deserved by our sin and the free participation in the life of Christ. Christ merits our redemption and forgives our sins but the punishment and penance for our selfish actions must still be.

Paul's letter to the Colossians notes that by offering our own sufferings for the body of Christ, we can make up for those members of the body of Christ whose sufferings are lacking. Thus the body of Christ, the Catholic Church, offers the collective suffering of its members for the expiation of temporal punishment and follows in the Passion and sufferings of the Head of the body of Christ, Jesus Christ.

That quotation, by the way, comes from the Roman Catholic statement that claims to explain the doctrine of justification by faith. But it does nothing of the sort. This is not justification by faith, it is justification by works.

Let me just briefly summarize that the Roman Catholic Church is saying. The Roman Catholic church says that Colossians chapter one, verse twenty-four refers to the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for sin. The Roman Catholic church teaches that the death of Christ restores you to grace, but that you must add your sufferings to the sufferings of Christ in order to *remain* in a state of salvation. The Roman Catholic church says that a person has to add his payment for his own sins to the payment of Christ, in order to satisfy the justice of God.

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Dear friends, let me tell you, on the authority of God's Word and nothing else, that this teaching is absolutely wrong. This teaching is a false gospel. This teaching makes people think they're on the way to Heaven, when all the while they are marching toward Hell. This teaching makes people think that they can add something to what Christ has done – and indeed makes them think that they *must* add something to what Christ has done – in order to be saved. That is absolutely wrong, wrong, wrong.

### **What It Actually Means**

Let me explain why. And the explanation begins by telling you exactly what Paul is saying here in Colossians 1:24. The word that Paul uses for the "afflictions" of Christ is the Greek word *thlipsis*. The word means, literally, "to be pressed together." And it is used forty-six times in the New Testament. It is always translated as "tribulation" or "affliction" or being "burdened" or having "trouble." Let me give you a few examples.

Romans 5:1-3 – "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in *tribulations* [there's the word], knowing that tribulation produces perseverance."

2 Corinthians 4:17 – "For our light *affliction* [there's the same word], which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

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Matthew 24:9 – “Then they will deliver you up to *tribulation* [there’s the same word] and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.”

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our *tribulation* [same word], that we may be able to comfort those who are in any *trouble* [the same Greek word again], with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ.”

Now this word is never used anywhere in the Bible when the Bible speaks of the sufferings of Christ on the cross for sin. It is used to speak of the afflictions that Christ endured *before* the Cross, not *on* the Cross. Let me point you to several verses that speak of this:

Hebrews 2:10 – “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect [that is, qualified] through sufferings.”

Hebrews 5:7-10 – "Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected [that is, proven to be qualified], He became the author of eternal salvation..."

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Hebrews 7:28 – “For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath [God’s oath], which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.”

Jesus Christ was demonstrated to be qualified to be the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, by the fact that He endured afflictions, persecutions, sufferings, the insults of men, their physical abuse, their blasphemies, their threats, all manner of physical and emotional and spiritual tribulation – He endured it all without once thinking a sinful thought, committing a sinful act, or speaking a sinful word.

### **What This Means for You**

Now, what does this mean for you as a Christian? When you suffer for the sake of righteousness, when you endure afflictions, when you endure persecutions, when you suffer the insults of the unsaved, when you are grieved by their blasphemies against Christ, when you endure any kind of physical, emotional, or spiritual tribulation imaginable – does that add one thing to the sufferings of Christ on the cross? Does that help to pay for your redemption? Absolutely not.

It simply means that you are a member of the Body of Christ, and the Body of Christ suffers for the sake of righteousness in this world, just as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself suffered for the sake of righteousness when He was in this world.

Paul is speaking here of the sufferings that Jesus endured during His earthly ministry. And those sufferings were necessarily for a limited period of time, because

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he then went to the Cross. But Paul is saying that those sufferings continue in the servants of Christ, in the body of Christ, as the Church fulfills the great commission to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, to go into all the world and make disciples from among all nations. All the saints down through the centuries are partakers of these sufferings, when we are faithful to our calling to proclaim the Gospel and seek to win men for Christ.

The sufferings of which Paul is speaking in Colossians 1:24 are not the *vicarious sufferings* of Christ for sin. The word that is used here never denotes that, anywhere in the Bible. An entirely different word is used in the Greek. When Paul speaks here of that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ, he is speaking of the continuation of the Lord Jesus Christ's *ministerial sufferings* in His body, the church, as the church lives for Him in a world in which we are now aliens, a world that is under the sway of the wicked one, the Devil. These sufferings have been going on in every generation of Christians that has continued to carry out the Lord's work on earth.

Paul says this: "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ...And our hope for you is steadfast, because we know that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation." (2 Corinthians 1:5-7)

In Philippians 3:10, Paul says that his desire is "that I may know Him [Christ] and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings [that is, of Christ's afflictions before the Cross], being conformed to His death."

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The full heritage of sufferings for the cause of Christ will not be completed until the Church of Jesus Christ is the Church triumphant – until the Church has finished its earthly conflict, until the Church has at last come up “out of great tribulation” to sit at the marriage-supper of the Lamb.

This raises the question, dear friend: Are you living your life in such a way that you are participating in that heritage? Are you taking a stand for Christ? Are you a living witness for Christ? Are you living before God in a manner that is fitting for a believer? Are you practicing Christ liberty as the Bible says you are to practice it, which means submission to Christ and not doing whatever you please?

Are you seeking to be fruitful in every good work, no matter what other people may think or say? Are you willing to speak out against the deceptions of false teachers? Are you on your guard against those who say you need more than Christ’s work in order to be saved?

Are you seeking to develop Christ-like character? Are you letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom? Do you seek to have a godly Christian home, and right relationships within the home between husband and wife and between parents and children?

Do you have a proper Christian attitude as an employee in the workplace? Are you doing the best job you possibly can for your employer and for your customers? Do you understand that your ultimate head, the authority in all these relationships, the

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One you ultimately answer to, is the Lord Jesus Christ. For the same reason, do you deal fairly with your employees or subordinates in the workplace?

Are you laboring in prayer for your fellow believers? Are you seeking to have fellowship with others in the body of Christ, to be identified with the Body of Christ, no matter what others may say or think? All of these things involve filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ. May each of us be willing to do our part – not in order to add anything to the sufferings of Christ for sin, but to “follow in His train” as members of the Body of Christ, aliens in this world awaiting our heavenly home.

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