



This guide is provided to help facilitate a clear understanding of the Bible passage with a focus on applying God's truth to our lives as individuals and as a group. Therefore, spend at least half your time discussing questions that are application focused. While the guide has been bulked up, you still need to prepare by praying through the passage, reviewing the guide on your own, and thinking about how your group might answer questions and follow-up questions.

Overview of Colossians

Background, Context and Structure

Paul's epistle to the Colossians was written to address the issue of the sufficiency of Christ in our salvation. The false teachings are not clear, but some rigid form of religious practices are alluded to, such as asceticism (2:18), observations of special occasions (2:17), and forms of ecstatic vision or special knowledge (2:18).

Paul begins his epistle with his usual pattern of thanksgiving and prayer for the church of Colossae. He then builds his case for the sufficiency of Christ in our salvation and the Christian life by elaborating on the preeminence and supremacy of Christ. The epistle climaxes as Paul presents Jesus as the foundation of our salvation, set against the false teachings of rigid asceticism, legalistic observations, ecstatic vision or esoteric knowledge. Paul then explains what it means to be alive in Christ and the practical implications of the gospel for our lives, contrasting this against the false teachings that displayed religiosity but miss the point of what it means to be in Christ.

Getting to Christ

Christ is the mystery for salvation now revealed for all men.

Big Idea of the Text

Christ is the mystery now richly and fully revealed, so Paul suffers and labours in his ministry for the maturity of these Christians.

What Your CG Must Take Away

Pursue maturity in Christ together in light of what Jesus has done.

Read Colossians 1:24-2:5

²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

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

- 1a. For what reason does Paul suffer and toil? (verses 1:24 and 2:1)
- 1b. What does Paul aim to do in his ministry?
2. What does it mean for Paul to “present everyone mature in Christ”? (1:28. 2:4-5)
3. According to the context of Colossians, what are some of the possible errors that Paul’s readers might be persuaded by? (2:4)
- 4a. What is the hidden mystery that Paul speaks of? How is it now revealed? (1:26-27, 2:2)
- 4b. How does being knitted together in love relate to our assurance and to our understanding of this mystery? (2:2)
- 5a. Through our actions and thoughts, how do we sometimes think we need to “perform” as Christians to achieve a certain “level of righteousness”?
How is this different from trusting in the sufficiency of Christ?
- 6a. How does understanding the “mystery revealed in Christ” compel us to love one another?
- 6b. How does Paul himself display this love for the Colossians? (1:24, 2:5)
7. How can we practically pursue maturity together in light of what Christ has done?

Apply Practically

Gather into small groups and share about how we are sometimes tempted to stray from the sufficiency of Christ, and encourage each other by praying specifically for those needs and weaknesses.

Appendix:

Text Note on Colossians 1:24, adapted from G. K. Beale's *Colossians and Philemon* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)

That Paul “fills up what is lacking in the tribulations of Christ” does not mean that there was an insufficiency in Christ’s atoning work at the cross, to which some other human could make addition, since everywhere else Paul is convinced of the sole and complete sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work for sinful people. Furthermore, if Paul were contending that Christ’s death was not completely sufficient, it would support the false teachers’ contention (later in the letter) that something more than Christ is required to receive divine blessings (Sumney 2008: 99). There are two primary ways of understanding this: 1) Paul is speaking of the general suffering of Christians in their union and identification with Christ and 2) Paul is speaking of his unique role of suffering as an Apostle that brings the gospel to the Gentile church and is an important apostolic call to bring the gospel to all nations for the beginning of the Christian church.

1. According to this perspective, these are not the “afflictions” of the historical Christ but the “afflictions of Christ” in “His body (which is the church),” part of which Paul experiences (“fills up”) in his own “flesh.” Since the “church” is explained to be Christ’s corporate “body” at the end of the verse (so also in Eph. 1: 23), Paul’s “filling up” of Christ’s trials means that he does his part (“in my flesh”) as a fellow member of God’s new covenant people in enduring the trials (patterned after Christ’s sufferings) destined throughout the inter-advent age for the benefit of Christ’s corporate body, the church. The idea is not so much that Paul’s suffering is part of the decreed afflictions of the corporate body of Christ so that other Christians will have to suffer less but that all have their allotted portion of suffering to endure. The church is destined for suffering because of its identification with Christ, who went through inaugurated end-time tribulations during his own earthly ministry. In Acts 26: 15, Jesus says to Paul at the Damascus Christophany, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” But Paul was persecuting Christians and not the very person of Jesus on earth. Jesus’s statement indicates that he corporately represents those who trust in him. Consequently, when his followers suffer, he can speak of himself as suffering. The reason believers suffer, however, is that they are first identified with Jesus and his earthly suffering destiny. Revelation 1: 9 testifies to this: “I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and endurance in Jesus.”* This threefold self-description in verse 9a is modeled on that of Christ’s in Rev. 1: 5a because John views Christians as corporately identified with Jesus. This corporate identity is the basis for the latter-day tribulations that confront them, as well as for their strength to endure such trials and to participate in the kingdom as kings (cf. Luke 24: 46; Acts 14: 22; Phil. 1: 29). Corporate identity with Jesus’s suffering is a theme found elsewhere in Paul (Rom. 8: 17; 2 Cor. 1: 5; 4: 10– 12; Phil. 3: 10).
2. Some affirm that Paul sees his “filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” to be something unique only to him and his apostolic role on behalf of the church. But a difficulty with this view is the recognition that the apostolic circle’s experiencing “the sufferings of Christ” is not unique to them but is shared by the Corinthian Christians (2 Cor. 1: 5– 7; cf. also 2 Cor. 4: 10,

“carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus,” which seems to refer to sufferings of the apostolic circle that are extended to the Corinthian believers [4: 14– 18]). Accordingly, it would seem unlikely that Paul portrays himself as the only one suffering and “filling up Christ’s afflictions” for the sake of the church, which does not share in the apostle’s unique suffering. But elsewhere Paul can refer to things about his apostolic role that are unique to him and to things that he holds in common with all believers. The question is which is the case here. We think the scales are tipped in the direction of his unique apostolic role. This does not mean that Christ’s unique atoning sufferings were incomplete or inadequate but that the general, imitative sufferings of Christ in fulfilling the prophecy of Israelite and Gentile salvation were incomplete. We saw above that all Christians share in and are destined to be conformed to the exemplary sufferings of Christ. So Col. 1: 24 is applying this general concept in a unique way to Paul as Christ’s suffering apostle. Paul does not suffer in an atoning manner for the church as Christ did, but he suffers as an apostle like Christ in completing the task of reconciliation that Christ began. Paul’s unique and definitive redemptive-historical “completing” of Christ’s sufferings is also pointed to by the parallel of Christ as “the head of the body, the church” (1: 18), with Paul “filling up the afflictions of Christ . . . on behalf of the body, which is the church”. Similarly, just as Christ’s reconciling work is to “present you holy and blameless and without reproach” (1: 22), so Paul as Christ’s apostolic agent is to “present every man . . . complete in Christ” (1: 28). Accordingly, Christ fulfills his part of the prophecy about reconciling the church (1: 18, 20, 22), and Paul completes this reconciling ministry as Christ’s apostolic agent. Therefore, Paul’s completion of the Messiah’s suffering “for your sake” and on “behalf of his body, the church” consists in the fact that Paul brought the message of reconciliation to the Gentiles for their great benefit, a ministry that did not occur through the earthly Christ’s ministry. The unique apostolic role of Paul will continue to be seen in 1: 25– 29.