

What Does It Mean to ‘Fill Up What’s Lacking in Christ’s Afflictions’?

TGC thegospelcoalition.org/article/lacking-in-christs-afflictions

Phil Thompson

The book of Colossians will make you scratch your head. In this little letter, Paul refers to Jesus as “the firstborn of all creation” ([Col. 1:15](#)), talks about “the circumcision of Christ” (2:11), refers to strange worship practices (2:18, 23), and mentions his unknown epistle to Laodicea (4:16)—just to mention a few tricky passages.

But one of the most difficult verses in the book is [Colossians 1:24](#): “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.”

What could possibly be lacking in Christ’s afflictions? And in any case, how on earth could *Paul* fill them up?

Diversity of Opinions

This verse was used to support the Roman Catholic doctrine of a treasury of merits both before and after the Protestant Reformation (we might call this the *Salvific view*). While current Roman Catholic scholars no longer advocate this view, hundreds of theologians over the centuries have attempted to make sense of the verse in other ways.

The reformer John Calvin provides one of the longest responses to the Salvific view of [Colossians 1:24](#). We might call his interpretation the *Mystical Union view*. Calvin’s understanding of what it means to “fill up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ” largely hinges on the mystical union of believers with Christ:

As, therefore, Christ has suffered once in his own person, so he suffers daily in his members, and in this way there are filled up those sufferings which the Father hath appointed for his body by his decree.

Up to the 1950s, Calvin’s interpretation was the most common among Protestant pastors and theologians. These interpreters frequently drew on the story of Saul’s conversion in [Acts 9:4](#), where Jesus notably asks him, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” (not “Why are you persecuting *my church*?”).

Although helpful in some respects, the Mystical Union view comes up lacking. The main problem is that even if Paul were talking about how Jesus continues to suffer alongside suffering Christians, in what sense is Paul able to “fill up” or “complete” those mystical sufferings? Why does it seem that Paul has a clear and definite amount of sufferings in mind?

As a result of these deficiencies, another interpretation arose in the 1950s and has become the common interpretation among commentators to this day. We’ll call this the *Messianic Woes view*. This interpretation, based on some alleged parallels in Jewish literature, claims that the church needs to fulfill a certain quota of sufferings prior to the return of Jesus. And this definite amount of sufferings is being trimmed down by men like Paul, who exerted himself and absorbed more than his fair share of these sufferings.

But this view has problems, too. First, it seems arrogant and misguided for Paul to claim that his missionary ministry inordinately absorbs the apocalyptic woes, such as those described by Jesus (see [Matt. 24–25](#)). Second, the passage seems to indicate that Paul’s suffering is of immediate benefit to the Colossian believers, an odd claim for suffering that’s oriented to the end times. Third, many of the alleged parallels in Jewish literature are not a good fit for the date or concept Paul uses.

So, what does this verse mean?

Better Alternative

Over the past decade, a new consensus has been emerging that spells out the meaning specifically in terms of mission—a more helpful and contextually strong interpretation of the passage, in my judgment.

When we look at the context, Paul goes on to say, “I have become [the church’s] servant, according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known” ([Col. 1:25](#)). Here Paul uses the idea of “fullness” again. He “fills up” Christ’s afflictions (1:24), and he makes the Word of God “fully known” (1:25). What’s the connection?

The connection is mission. Paul is saying he’s carrying out his God-given Gentile mission. And in carrying out that mission, he’s making the message fully known geographically, taking it to the ends of his known world and establishing a gospel beachhead across the Empire.

What does he mean when he talks about a “lack”? The lack is the gap of sufferings between the present reach of the gospel and the suffering necessary to establish a gospel presence among all the Gentiles, paralleling Jesus’s own mission to bring the gospel to the Jewish people (see the same language of “minister” and “filling/fulfilling” in [Rom. 15:8, 16, 19](#)).

 | The ‘lack’ is the gap of sufferings between the present reach of the gospel and the suffering necessary to establish a gospel presence among all the Gentiles.

So how does Paul fill up that lack? Answer: by carrying the gospel message all the way to the heart of the Roman Empire.

And how have those sufferings been “for [their] sake”? Answer: Paul’s sufferings have benefited both the Gentiles broadly (as seen in the expansive reach of the message, [Col. 1:6a](#)) and the Colossian church specifically (as seen in their adherence to the gospel, [Col. 1:6b–8](#)).

So What?

If you’re stepping in and joining God in his mission to reclaim worshipers for himself, you will experience some measure of suffering or pain. This is what it *means* to join him in the spread of his gospel to the ends of his earth. This may be as simple as relational discomfort or [the awkwardness of trying to share your faith](#); it may be as extreme as risking your life or moving your family to a place where few have heard the name of Jesus.

The flip side is that if you’re presently at your most comfortable, then it’s possible you haven’t really joined God in his mission to advance the gospel. When you, like Paul, see your missionary story enveloped by the missionary story of God in Christ, you’ll discover fresh power and greater purpose as you engage those who are far from their Maker.

And, strange as it may sound, you too will fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.

Phil Thompson (PhD, Columbia International University) develops strategies for The Gospel Coalition’s digital properties and manages strategic content relationships with TGC’s ministry partners. He is a teaching pastor at [Christ Fellowship Eastside](#), a recent church plant, and travels frequently to train pastors in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. He and his wife, Laurel, live in Greenville, South Carolina, with their daughters Lane, Kately, Harper, and Darcy.

