

Completing What is Lacking in Christ's Passion: Colossians 1:24 and Paul's Theology of the Cross

Together with Philippians, Ephesians, and Philemon, Colossians is considered as a prison letter.¹ It is addressed to "... the saints and faithful brethren in Christ at Colossae" (Col 1:2). Colossae was situated in Phrygia (modern-day Turkey), in the Lycus valley, in proximity to the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis.² While in its heyday the city was described as populous and wealthy, by the beginning of the Christian era, Colossae was on the wane and was eventually surpassed by neighbouring Laodicea and Hierapolis.³

The believers of the community at Colossae were not converted by Paul himself.⁴ While the missionary work was directed by Paul, several churches founded in the province of Asia were founded by his co-workers.⁵ Such was the case with Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis, considered the result of the missionary work of Epaphras (Col 1:7-8).⁶ The population of Colossae comprised

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¹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 17 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 4.

² See *ibid.*, 9; Maurya P. Horgan, "The Letter to the Colossians," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2005), 876.

³ See Horgan, "Letter to the Colossians," 876; Peter T. O'Brien, "Letter to the Colossians," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 147.

⁴ See MacDonald, *Letter to the Colossians and Ephesians*, 9; O'Brien, "Letter to the Colossians," 147.

⁵ See O'Brien, "Letter to the Colossians," 147-148.

⁶ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 9; O'Brien, "Letter to the Colossians," 148.

mainly native Phrygians and Greeks, together with a significant number of Jews.⁷ It has been suggested that most of the community were gentile converts due to allusions to a non-Christian past.⁸ In Col 1:21 it is stated: “And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” However, God “... had effected a mighty change in their lives: he had reconciled them to himself in an earth-shattering event, namely, Christ’s physical death on the cross,”⁹ attested to in Col 1:22. The authorship of Colossians has been widely contested. Various scholars argue for the probability of a non-Pauline authorship of the Epistle to the Colossians.¹⁰ Within this perspective, it is safe to agree with Lohse who concludes that: “Rather a theologian schooled in Pauline thought composed the letter with the intention of bringing the Apostle’s word to bear on the situation that had arisen in the Asia Minor communities because of the philosophers.”¹¹

Colossians 1:24

“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church ...” (Col 1:24).¹²

Col 1:24 has been regarded as one of the most difficult passages, and as a result has been the source of “... numerous problems of interpretation as well as doctrinal questions.”¹³ As Peter O’Brien points out: “It appears to express ideas that go beyond Paul’s statements elsewhere and which seem to have no parallel in the rest of the New Testament.”¹⁴ This is corroborated by Petr Pokorný, who argues that this verse “... seems to be saying something that relativises the Pauline witness concerning the sufficiency of redemption in Jesus Christ.”¹⁵ The main issues revolve

⁷ See Horgan, “Letter to the Colossians,” 876; O’Brien, “Letter to the Colossians,” 147.

⁸ See O’Brien, “Letter to the Colossians,” 148.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of this topic, see Dorianne Buttigieg, *Colossians 1:24 and Paul’s Theology of the Cross* (MA diss. University of Malta, 2014), 29-38.

¹¹ Edward Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 181.

¹² All biblical quotes, unless otherwise stated, are taken from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Catholic ed. prepared by the Catholic Biblical Association of Great Britain (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1966).

¹³ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 78-79.

¹⁴ Peter T. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Dallas, TX: Nelson Reference, 1982), 75.

¹⁵ Petr Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 96.

mainly around the following words: ἀνταναπληρώω, τὰ ὑστερήματα, and θλίψεων. David Hay concedes that Paul's sufferings are mentioned in the undisputed letters, however the formulation displayed in Col 1:24 is unique.¹⁶ He also states that while Paul's sufferings are also present in Eph 3:1,13; 4:1; 6:20, yet there is not the concept of fulfillment present in Col 1: 24.¹⁷

The passage seems to suggest that Christ's sacrifice was in some way insufficient, and is being brought to fulfillment by Paul. However, this suggestion must be discarded, as the central theme in Colossians (and in the New Testament, for that matter) is the reconciliation which has been accomplished once and for all through the death of Christ (1:13-14; 1:22). Jean-Noel Aletti comments on the mistake of the majority of commentaries in their translation of the verse as: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."¹⁸ Rather, the verse should be translated as: "... what is lacking in Christ's afflictions in my flesh."¹⁹

The first person singular χαίρω (which follows from verse 23) is in contrast to the previous plurals, such as "we give thanks" (v. 3).²⁰ Thus, what follows from verse 24 is a reference to the apostle himself.²¹ According to O'Brien, the word νῦν (now): "points not so much to Paul's actual imprisonment, which is not specifically mentioned until 4:3, but to the present time when Christ's lordship ... [was being] proclaimed universally in the Gospel and when he, Paul, ... [was] privileged to suffer as a servant of that Gospel and for the Colossians."²²

This is especially brought out through the word πάθημα (also mentioned in 2 Cor 1:4-7 and Phil 3:10),²³ usually used here by Paul to designate his actual afflictions "... bound up with the special significance of his calling to minister to gentiles through the world-wide preaching of the gospel."²⁴ The apostle rejoices in his suffering ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν (for your sake), for the sake of the Colossians,²⁵ even despite them having never personally met Paul. Since Paul has had no personal

¹⁶ See David M. Hay, *Colossians*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 71.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*

¹⁸ See Jean-Noël Aletti, *Lettera ai Colossesi*, new rev. and enl. ed. (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2011), 125.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*

²⁰ See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 75.

²¹ See *ibid.*; Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), 36.

²² O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 75.

²³ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 69.

²⁴ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 76.

²⁵ See *ibid.*

contact with the Colossians, therefore, according to Bratcher and Nida, Paul's sufferings on behalf of the Colossians must be understood only in a general sense, that is, the notion of his hardships and toil in his work as an apostle of the gentiles.²⁶ According to Thomas Abbott, ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν is to be connected with παθήμασιν, where "his sufferings had been brought on him by his labours on behalf of the gentiles ... and so with a kindly personal reference he represents them as endured on behalf of the Colossians, who shared in the benefit of his ministry."²⁷

Thus, the initial statement of verse 24 reflects a characteristic Pauline theme, namely that of rejoicing in suffering. Examples from the undisputed Pauline letters include Rom 5:3; 2 Cor 1:5-7; 2 Cor 7:4; 2 Cor 12:10 and 1 Thes 1:6. James Dunn points out that though such suffering characterizes apostolic ministry, it is "not distinctive of it either."²⁸ While this theme is not a uniquely Pauline theme - as it is also found in Stoic and Jewish sources - yet "it is the response of those who recognize that suffering positively reacted to can be a maturing experience, as also of those convinced of the rightness of their cause, which conviction functions as an inner source of strength and transforms the sufferings into a confirmation of that rightness."²⁹

Paul's theology of suffering, however, goes further. For Paul, suffering entailed suffering with Christ, and a sharing in his sufferings (e.g. Rom 8:17; 2 Cor 1:5 and Phil 3:10-11); a theme developed in Col 1:24.³⁰

Ἀνταναπληρώω, ὑστέρημα, θλίψις

The second part of verse 24 aims to clarify and explain more closely the meaning of the first part of verse 24. Jerry Sumney, who himself departs from the Graeco-Roman understanding of the sufferings of the virtuous in order to provide insight into this passage, groups the different interpretations into four main categories. First, in Col 1:24 it is suggested that Christ's sufferings may be supplemented by the merit earned by the saints and martyrs.³¹ Secondly, scholars

²⁶ See Bratcher and Nida, *Colossians and Philemon*, 37.

²⁷ Thomas Kingsmill Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (New York: Scribner, 1909), 229.

²⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 114.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ See *ibid.*

³¹ See Jerry L. Sumney, "I Fill Up What is Lacking in the Afflictions of Christ': Paul's Vicarious Suffering in Colossians," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2006): 665.

such as Joseph Lightfoot view in this verse a distinction between suffering as a sacrifice for sin and suffering for edification.³² Other scholars such as Hay, MacDonald and Albert Schweizer see in this passage a mystical union between Christ and Christians;³³ while others such as Charles Francis Moule, Lohse and O'Brien see an apocalyptic notion where the sufferings of the apostle are envisaged as part of the Messianic woes and tribulations to be fulfilled before the parousia.³⁴

The double compound *ἀνταναπληρώω* is not found anywhere else in the LXX or the New Testament, while *ἀναπληρώω* occurs elsewhere in the Pauline letters,³⁵ with the meaning of “fill up [completely],” and twice related to *ὕστέρημα*, in, for example, 1 Cor 16:17 and Phil 2:30. The variation in meaning or nuance introduced in *ἀναπληροῦν* by the addition of *ἀντι-* has been a source of debate. Drawing from examples in Greek literature, Gerhard Delling argues that the prefix *ἀντι-* “... denotes mutual representative or repeated ‘supplementing’ or ‘replacing,’ with some overlapping of the specific nuances.”³⁶ Citing examples, Abbott points out that in composition with a verb, *ἀντι-* does not entail “instead of another,” but “over against,” which may be either in opposition to (such as *ἀντιλέγω* and *ἀντικείμεαι*) or correspondence (such as *ἀντιμετρέω* or *ἀντικαλέω* in Lk 14:12).³⁷ Within this thread, Abbott concludes that “the requirements of this passage seem to be fully met by the idea of correspondence.”³⁸ Part of the force of the word is heaped on the idea of correspondence, so perhaps this serves to make *ἀνταναπληρώω* more natural and down-to-earth than *ἀναπληρώω*.³⁹ Lightfoot understands that through the use of this prefix “... the supply comes *from an opposite quarter* to the deficiency.”⁴⁰ According to Lohse, *ἀνταναπληρώω* “... emphasizes that what is now being completed is a compensation which will be

³² See *ibid.*

³³ See *ibid.*; MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 79.

³⁴ See Charles Francis Digby Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 76; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 78-80.

³⁵ See Joseph B. Lightfoot, *St Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Revised Text with Introductions, Notes, and Dissertations* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 164.

³⁶ Gerhard Delling, “πλήρης, πληρώω, πλήρωμα, ἀναπληρώω, ἀνταναπληρώω, ἐκπληρώω, ἐκπλήρωσις, συμπληρώω, πληροφορέω, πληροφοροῦσθαι,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:307.

³⁷ See Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 229.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ See *ibid.*, 230.

⁴⁰ Lightfoot, *Paul's Epistles*, 165.

substituted for what is lacking.”⁴¹ Within an apocalyptic perspective, “the apostle, through the sufferings which he painfully bears in his own flesh, contributes to foreshortening the eschatological afflictions,” which, in turn herald the rise of the future glory.⁴² Delling points out that the meaning of the term corresponds to the vicarious filling up in relation of the measure of eschatological affliction heaped on the community “... in the non-mystical but soberly realistic fellowship of its destiny with Christ on the basis of its dying with Him.”⁴³

Douglas Moo, on the other hand, presents five main possibilities which might correspond to the meaning denoted by the preposition ἀντι-. First, the verb could mean “fill up in place of,” whereby Paul undergoes his suffering in place of the Church.⁴⁴ The second possibility is “fill up on behalf of,” which is the sense embraced by Moule,⁴⁵ while the third option is “fill up in response to,” where “... Paul’s sufferings respond to what is lacking.”⁴⁶ A reciprocal significance, where Paul, following Christ, suffers for the sake of the Church, is a fourth possibility.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the verb could simply mean “to fill up,” given the tendency of koine Greek to use compound verbs.⁴⁸ Moo adopts the third option as a real possibility, thus adopting the meaning of (albeit with some hesitation) “I am filling up in order to complete’ *what is lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions.*”⁴⁹ While Paul follows in the steps of Christ, in his own suffering for the sake of the Church, he is still completing something that is lacking regarding Christ’s afflictions, a notion which will be analysed in relation with the next terms.

The term τὰ ὑστερήματα is here used in the plural because, in Abbott’s words, “the afflictions are not regarded as a unity from which there is a definite shortcoming.”⁵⁰ According to Lohse, the apostle “performs a vicarious service” and completes “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.”⁵¹ The word ὑστέρημα entails a deficiency, or what is lacking.⁵² While this word can connote the absence of a person to whom one is connected, as in 1 Cor 16:17 or Phil 2:30, it can also designate a deficiency

⁴¹ Lohse, *Colossians, Philemon*, 71.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Delling, “πλήρης, πληρώω, πλήρωμα,” 307.

⁴⁴ See Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 150.

⁴⁵ See Moule, *Epistles*, 79.

⁴⁶ Moo, *Letters*, 150.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*; Lightfoot, *Paul’s Epistles*, 165.

⁴⁸ See Moo, *Letters*, 150-151.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁵⁰ Abbott, *Ephesians and Colossians*, 230.

⁵¹ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70.

⁵² See *ibid.*, 71.

in relation to a specific situation, as highlighted in 1 Thes 3:10.⁵³ Ulrich Wilckens compares Paul's position in Col 1: 24 to that of Epaphroditus in Phil 2:30, arguing that while Epaphroditus "... fills up the ὑστέρημα of the Church in his own person as their envoy, so Paul as an apostle of Christ represents the exalted Kyrios to the Church."⁵⁴ However, in the latter case, the lack which Paul fills up entails the θλίψεις τοῦ Χριστοῦ, which the apostle takes upon himself and embraces in his sufferings in this earthly life.⁵⁵ While Christ has triumphed over his sufferings, "his place on earth, the place of his sufferings, is now taken by the apostle, who is honoured to be able to suffer for the Church as the body of Christ."⁵⁶

Scholars have noted that the term θλίψις is never applied to Jesus' suffering in the Pauline and deutero-Pauline epistles,⁵⁷ or anywhere else in the New Testament,⁵⁸ but is a term frequently employed by Paul in order to portray the hardships undergone by those who proclaim the Gospel.⁵⁹ In the LXX, the term is used to designate various Hebrew terms to express the distress and oppression in life in various nuances.⁶⁰ Examples include Ex 4:31 and Dt 4:29.⁶¹ Its theological significance is especially evident since "... it predominantly denotes the oppression and affliction of the people of Israel or of the righteous who represent Israel."⁶² The various forms of oppression of the people of Israel, especially evident in the enslavement in Egypt and the Babylonian captivity, constitute main events in salvation history.⁶³ The sufferings of righteous individuals are especially brought out in the Psalms, such as 33:19; 36:39 and 137:7.⁶⁴

In the New Testament, those who experience affliction are the members of the Church, especially the apostles.⁶⁵ Thus, as Heinrich Schlier points out: "The

⁵³ See *ibid.*; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 80.

⁵⁴ Ulrich Wilckens, "ὑστέρημα, ὑστέρησις," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 8:599.

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 599-600.

⁵⁷ See George Bradford Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) in the Revised Standard Version*, The New Clarendon Bible [New Testament] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 184; Aletti, *Colossesi*, 126.

⁵⁸ See Moule, *Epistles*, 77; Hay, *Colossians*, 71-72; Moo, *Letters*, 151.

⁵⁹ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 79.

⁶⁰ See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 78; Heinrich Schlier, "θλίβω, θλίψεις," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 3:141.

⁶¹ See Schlier, "θλίβω, θλίψεις," 142.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ See *ibid.*; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁶⁴ See Schlier, "θλίβω, θλίψεις," 142.

⁶⁵ See *ibid.*, 143.

constant tribulation of Israel in the Old Testament has become the necessary tribulation of the Church in the New Testament.⁶⁶ Examples of θλίψεις in the Pauline corpus include Rom 5:3; 8:35; 2 Cor 1:4,8 and 2:4. In this light, the afflictions are portrayed as those of Paul, rather than of Christ.⁶⁷ Therefore, according to Hay, “Paul’s afflictions are not here understood as making up for any insufficiency in Christ’s death but rather as sufferings endured for Christ’s sake.”⁶⁸ Going a step further, filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions would become a way of expressing the suffering that is “deemed a necessary step in the completion of what is required for the growth of the Church and the completion of Paul’s mission.”⁶⁹ While the sufferings of Christ are not yet exhausted, now the apostle himself experiences and accomplishes them on behalf of the Church, the body of Christ.⁷⁰ Thus, “in the θλίψεις which come upon the apostle there is a continuation of the sufferings which Christ has already suffered.”⁷¹

Margaret MacDonald envisages verse 1:24 in terms of a profound religious experience of an early Church community where “... one detects a profound sense of interconnectedness among believers, community, cosmos and Christ.”⁷² This verse represents the close relationship between Paul and Christ in the most powerful terms.⁷³ According to Hay, the term ἀνταναπληρώω, explored earlier, may suggest that Paul is accomplishing his share of sufferings for the cause of Christ.⁷⁴

While Caird agrees that suffering endured for the sake of the Gospel can present the deepest fellowship with Christ (since “...Christ lives on in *the Church* and makes its sufferings his own”),⁷⁵ yet he argues that the emphasis here is on the suffering undergone on behalf of others.⁷⁶ He goes on to argue that the double compound ἀνταναπληρώω entails that apart from suffering on their account, Paul also suffers to an extent in their stead.⁷⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ See MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 79.

⁶⁸ Hay, *Colossians*, 72.

⁶⁹ MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 79.

⁷⁰ See Schlier, “θλίβω, θλίψεις,” 144.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, 79.

⁷³ See *ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁴ See Hay, *Colossians*, 72.

⁷⁵ Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 184.

⁷⁶ See *ibid.*

⁷⁷ See *ibid.*

“Christ’s Afflictions”: A Jewish Apocalyptic Background

Having highlighted the various interpretations, this study will now focus on the apocalyptic framework which, within the perspective undertaken in this work, provides a solid basis for the interpretation of verse 24. The apocalyptic perspective has been upheld by scholars such as Moule, Lohse, O’Brien and Moo, among others. To begin with, the term *θλιψις* (discussed in some detail earlier), used in the LXX, acquired its theological significance from the fact that it primarily denoted the hardships and afflictions endured by the people of Israel or of the righteous who represented Israel.⁷⁸ Examples include the bondage in Egypt and the Babylonian exile, which, as O’Brien points out, constituted pivotal significance in salvation history.⁷⁹ Examples of these main events occur in Ex 4:31; Dt 4:29; 28:47-68, and 2 Kgs 19:3. Psalms such as 9:10; 22:5 and 33:7 highlight the afflictions of the righteous in Israel.⁸⁰ On the other hand, Dn 12:1 also points to a future *ἡμέρα θλιψεως*.⁸¹

Jewish apocalyptic writing, which focused on “the present age” and “the coming age”⁸² frequently delineated the tribulations and catastrophes impending upon the world according to God’s definitive design,⁸³ envisaged as “... a prelude to the end-time which would usher in the coming anointed ruler of God.”⁸⁴ These tribulations ran the gamut of catastrophes from famine, plagues and war and disturbance of the cosmic order, to adversities which the chosen people of God had to endure.⁸⁵

The zenith of these temporal and cosmic disorders would herald the advent of the anointed one.⁸⁶ The afflictions of these last days are hence called the “woes of the Messiah” (examples to be found in Mt 24:8 and Mk 13:8) since they immediately harbingers the arrival of God’s anointed ruler.⁸⁷ Thus, in Mk 13:8, the metaphor of the woman in childbirth is employed to express the advent of the final

⁷⁸ See Schlier, “*θλιβω, θλιψις*,” 142.

⁷⁹ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁸⁰ See *ibid.*

⁸¹ See *ibid.*

⁸² See Larry J. Kreitzer, “Apocalyptic, Apocalypticism,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 63-64.

⁸³ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70; David E. Aune, “Apocalypticism,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 27.

⁸⁴ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁸⁵ See *ibid.*; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70.

⁸⁶ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁸⁷ See *ibid.*; Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70; Moo, *Letters*, 151.

catastrophes, as it is pain and suffering that precede the coming turn of events.⁸⁸ As described by O'Brien these events "are the travail out of which the Messianic age is born. God has set a limit to these sufferings, prescribing a definite measure for the afflictions which the righteous and the martyrs must endure."⁸⁹ An example from Jewish apocalyptic literature includes 1 Enoch 47:1-4. In Jewish apocalyptic writing, the role of the Messiah, or the Anointed One and his functions are especially delineated in 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra.⁹⁰ In 2 Bar 30:1 for example, it is written: "And it will happen after these things when the time of the appearance of the Anointed One has been fulfilled and he returns with glory, that then all who sleep in hope of him will rise."⁹¹

This apocalyptic notion in relation to the end of time is present in New Testament teaching.⁹² Thus, in Mk 13:19-24, the measure and extent of these afflictions have been set by God.⁹³ In this way, these afflictions have been limited.⁹⁴ However, the apocalyptic concept of the Messianic woes has been significantly modified in the New Testament.⁹⁵ First, rather than an unknown figure who must appear at the end of time, the New Testament specifies that "it will be the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven who is none other than the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. The sorrows to be endured will usher in his glorious appearing for judgment and salvation."⁹⁶ Secondly, the inauguration of the "second age" has been made possible with the death and resurrection of Jesus.⁹⁷ The afflictions of Christ, equivalent to the woes of the Messiah, have already begun and at the apex of their limit "... the coming age will be consummated and this present evil age will pass away."⁹⁸

The basic dualism of Jewish apocalypticism during the late Second Temple period, suffused with Christian belief, has also found its way into Pauline thought.⁹⁹ For example, Paul presents a contrast between the present evil age and

⁸⁸ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70.

⁸⁹ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁹⁰ See James H. Charlesworth, "Introduction for the General Reader," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 1:xxxii.

⁹¹ Albertus F. J. Klijn, "2 (Syriac Apocalypse of) Baruch (early Second Century A.D.)," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 631.

⁹² See O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁹³ See *ibid.*

⁹⁴ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 70.

⁹⁵ See *ibid.*; O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁹⁶ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 79.

⁹⁷ See *ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ See Aune, "Apocalypticism," 31.

the new age of salvation (as evident in Rom 8:18 and 1 Cor 1:26); however, the sharp distinction between the two ages is significantly modified in Paul, where Paul "... understood the death and resurrection of Jesus in the past as cosmic eschatological events that separated 'this age' (Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:20; 2: 6), or 'this present evil age' (Gal 1:4), from the age to come."¹⁰⁰

Moreover, the belief in the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah enabled Paul to view the eschatological events as having already started to take place in history.¹⁰¹ This period is a temporary period between Christ's death and resurrection and his return in glory, a period which "... is characterized by the eschatological gift of the Spirit of God who is experienced as present within the Christian community in general as well as within particular believers who are members of the Christian community."¹⁰² Examples include Rom 8:9-11 and 1 Thes 4:8. Since the Messiah, who is none other than the *Christos*, has already come, the new age is present for Christians, even though the final consummation still pertained to the future.¹⁰³ Within this perspective, "those who die 'in Christ' are united with him in heaven after their personal deaths and live in a glorified state; they also will share in the resurrection at the parousia."¹⁰⁴

In Paul, there is also the tendency to apply this apocalyptic cosmic change from the present evil age to the future age of salvation, as a paradigm for the transformation experienced by the individual believer, through Christ.¹⁰⁵ Thus, in 2 Cor 5:7 (NRSV) it is written: "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" Christ is central to Paul. In contrast to Jewish apocalyptic literature (which envisages the coming of God or his authorized agent, the Messiah, as bringing forth the inauguration of the eschaton), the centre of Paul's eschatological hope shifts from God to Christ.¹⁰⁶ Hence, it is written: "... on that day when, according to my Gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rom 2:16).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ See *ibid.*; Raymond E. Brown et al., "Aspects of New Testament Thought," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2005), 1363; Fitzmyer, "Pauline Theology," in *ibid.*, 1392.

¹⁰² Aune, "Apocalypticism," 31.

¹⁰³ See *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Brown et al., "New Testament Thought," 1363.

¹⁰⁵ See Aune, "Apocalypticism," 32-33.

¹⁰⁶ See *ibid.*, 33.

The Sufferings of the Apostle for the Sake of the Church

“His [Paul’s] contributing to the sum total of the messianic afflictions, through his service and suffering bound up with his calling as an apostle or minister to the Gentiles, is on behalf of Christ’s body.”¹⁰⁷ Within the apocalyptic framework just analysed, God has set a definite measure for the tribulations which the martyrs and righteous must undergo before the end. The completion of this phase heralds the end, and the beginning of a “new world dawn.”¹⁰⁸ However, in this present era, there is still something lacking in Christ’s afflictions, the lack which the apostle is completing through his sufferings.¹⁰⁹ What the apostle is completing through his sufferings, brought out through the verb *ἀνταναπληρώω*, is a rectification which substitutes what is lacking.¹¹⁰ What is lacking, according to Moo, are “the tribulations that are inevitable and necessary as God’s kingdom faces the opposition of the ‘dominion of darkness.’”¹¹¹ On the other hand, Pokorný argues that it is “the appropriation of the already complete salvation” which is still lacking.¹¹² What is certain is that, being part of the chosen people of God redeemed by Christ entails a sharing in Christ’s afflictions, though these are, by themselves, complete. Very much in line with the apocalyptic perspective, this entails experiencing the necessary suffering which permeates the fabric of the Christian’s existence, in the expectation of the final glory.

The apostle, “through the sufferings which he painfully bears in his own flesh, contributes to foreshortening the eschatological afflictions. This, in turn, brings the dawning of the future glory all the closer.”¹¹³ In the epistle to the Colossians, Christ’s afflictions are no longer envisaged as a part of an imminent expectation of an end in future times, but rather the outlook is towards the present or the past “... characterized by the apostle’s service of founding churches.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, in helping to fill up what is lacking of the predetermined measure of afflictions to be endured by the holy, Paul is thus reducing the ordeals to be borne by other believers, being, in this case, the Colossian community.¹¹⁵ In O’Brien’s exact words, “The more of these sufferings he personally absorbed,

¹⁰⁷ O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 80.

¹⁰⁸ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 71.

¹⁰⁹ See *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ See *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Moo, *Letters*, 152.

¹¹² Pokorný, *Colossians*, 99-100.

¹¹³ Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 71.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹¹⁵ See O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 80.

as he went about preaching the Gospel, the less would remain for his fellow Christians to endure.”¹¹⁶

Like Christ, Paul must suffer to enable the successful proclamation of the Gospel. In fact, Paul is depicted as the suffering apostle par excellence, and his suffering is part and parcel of his missionary work. This is evident in such examples as Col 4:3; 10:18. In line with the prophets, the image of the apostle was fundamentally displayed through the depiction of his sufferings.¹¹⁷ While “without exception they were pictured as persecuted and suffering, and martyrdom was the very reason they were raised to their position of honour,”¹¹⁸ this is the same path laid out for Paul, as evidenced in Acts 9:16 and Eph 3:1.¹¹⁹ These remaining afflictions are borne by Paul ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου.

Hay ponders on the phrase “for your sake” in the first part of the verse, and “for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” at the end of the verse.¹²⁰ He points out that the latter phrase is a kind of clarification which drives home the point that Paul’s sufferings are for the universal Church, a church of which the Colossians form part, even though they have never met Paul.¹²¹ This is corroborated by Aletti, who points out that this language, that is, “for the sake of his body, which is the Church” is here reminiscent of verse 18, where the “Church” does not constitute a local assembly of believers, but entails the “universal Church.”¹²² Reflecting Christ himself, Paul suffers in order to fulfil his mission of proclaiming Christ to the Church, and at the same time, contributes towards the perfection of the Church itself.

Paul’s Afflictions

“... But as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labours, watching, hunger ...” (2 Cor 6:4-5). It has been shown that Col 1:24 is inextricably bound to the suffering which must be constantly borne by the apostle for the sake of the churches, this being primarily a part and parcel of the very call to being an apostle. Within this perspective, one cannot help agreeing with Scott Hafemann in stating that: “The questions of the inevitability

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ See Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, 72.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ See *ibid.*

¹²⁰ See Hay, *Colossians*, 73.

¹²¹ See *ibid.*

¹²² See Aletti, *Colossesi*, 127.

and purpose of suffering in the life of Christians in general, and in the life of Paul as an apostle in particular, are recurring themes of great significance throughout Paul's letters."¹²³

Paul speaks of suffering and affliction over sixty times, apart from specific instances of tribulations, such as his own imprisonment.¹²⁴ His second letter to the Corinthians (e.g. 2 Cor 1:3-11; 2:14-17 and 4:7-12) contains the most detailed exposition of the subject.¹²⁵ The apostle's afflictions, in turn, are catalogued in various letters, most notably in Rom 8:35; 1 Cor 4:9-13; and 2 Cor 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29 and 12:10. These lists, called "*peristasis* catalogues,"¹²⁶ bring out the various trials which Paul had to undergo, which run the gamut of adversities from imprisonments, beatings and near death experiences, journeys and dangers in the form of opposition from Jews, gentiles and false Christians, to hunger and thirst, and preoccupation for the churches.¹²⁷ The most exhaustive and comprehensive of these lists appears in 2 Cor 11:23-29.¹²⁸ It can thus be deduced that Paul's burden took various forms, which were far from few. What J. Sampley says about 2 Cor 11:21b-29, applies to all affliction lists, thereby highlighting their function: "His [Paul's] evidence for being a better minister of Christ begins with his labours ... and immediately merges into a hardship list of great proportions Once again, Paul's ministry is ironically best measured by the difficulties, adversities, afflictions, and setbacks he has encountered and surmounted in his representation of the Gospel."¹²⁹

In some writings of the Old Testament (for example in Wis 3:5-6; Sir 2:1-5 and Jdt 8:25-26), the pervading notion is that the aim of suffering is a test of character.¹³⁰ Colin Kruse and Ralph Martin see a parallelism between the lists of Paul's afflictions and the lists of afflictions employed by Hellenistic moralists in order to encourage a stoical behaviour in the midst of suffering and hardships, but the similarity ends there.¹³¹ While the latter would belittle the impact of the

¹²³ Scott Jack Hafemann, "Suffering," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 919.

¹²⁴ See *ibid.*, 919.

¹²⁵ See *ibid.*

¹²⁶ See *ibid.*, 920-921.

¹²⁷ See Colin G. Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 18-19.

¹²⁸ See *ibid.*, 18; J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," in *The New Interpreter's Bible ... including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, vol. 11 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 11:157.

¹²⁹ Sampley, "Second Letter to the Corinthians," 157.

¹³⁰ See Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," 19.

¹³¹ See *ibid.*, 19; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40 (Waco,

afflictions and celebrate the individual's triumph over them as a demonstration of their strength, "Paul frankly admitted the distress caused by his afflictions (2 Cor 1:8-9), and gloried in the fact that it was God's power, not his own, which enabled him to endure (2 Cor 12:9-10)."¹³² It is evident that for all the sufferings implicated, Paul does not hesitate to put the Gospel first and foremost in his life, and this is especially evident in his thoroughly detailed listing of afflictions.¹³³

The list portrays the various types of afflictions borne by Paul, following a particular pattern.¹³⁴ These persecutions certainly attest to shameful circumstances. However, in 2 Cor 11:23-29 Paul goes further when he boasts of his beatings. What is the reason for this seemingly odd behaviour, especially in a situation which was aimed at undermining his apostolic authority in Corinth? As Jennifer Glancy points out, Paul boasts of things, such as floggings and beatings, which were considered at times as weaknesses in a first-century society,¹³⁵ even though the Graeco-Roman perspective implies otherwise (as seen above).

Within a situation which appears contradictory to his apostolic authority, Paul presents his situation as parallel to Jesus' meekness. At the same time, he discourages the Corinthians from deducing an inability on his part to wield authority in the face of his apparent self-denial, as evident in 2 Cor 10:1-2.¹³⁶ In the face of the situation at Corinth, Glancy states that the reasons for Paul's boasting of his beatings were strategic reasons and theological ones.¹³⁷ The former were a response to a situation which had seen taunts and jeering at Corinth, while the latter dealt with the belief that the story of Jesus' death was "legible in the scar tissue that has formed over welts and lacerations inflicted by rod and whip."¹³⁸ Thus, the Gospel is undeniably present in the face of Paul's vulnerability.¹³⁹ The persecutions permeating his mission must have led Paul to understand that this is all God's work.¹⁴⁰ To use Sampley's words: "Paul's inversion of his boast so that it focuses on his weakness goes to the heart of his Gospel - namely, that the power belongs to God."¹⁴¹ Therefore, in this manner, Paul can better vouch for

TX: Nelson Reference, 1986), 368.

¹³² Ibid., 19; see Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 368.

¹³³ See Sampley, "Second Letter to the Corinthians", 157.

¹³⁴ See *ibid.*; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 368-372.

¹³⁵ See Jennifer A. Glancy, "Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23-25)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123, no. 1 (2004): 101.

¹³⁶ See *ibid.*, 129-130; Sampley, "Second Letter to the Corinthians," 158.

¹³⁷ See Glancy, "Boasting of Beatings," 135.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ See Sampley, "Second Letter to the Corinthians," 158.

¹⁴⁰ See *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

the authenticity of his apostleship.¹⁴² This is what being a Christian is, after all. It is about allowing God's grace to work in one's life, even if it (apparently) entails wreaking havoc in the believer's life!

As seen in the previous section, Paul's ideas of suffering were especially influenced by the suffering of the righteous as depicted in the Old Testament and Jewish apocalyptic literature, and also by Paul's own theology of the cross.¹⁴³

Paul's Imprisonment

Imprisonment is listed among one of the many afflictions suffered by Paul throughout his mission. Indeed, it appears from 2 Cor 11:23 that Paul had been imprisoned repeatedly, apart from the imprisonment at Philippi, referred to in Acts 16:23-40.¹⁴⁴ Most notably, the notion of imprisonment is especially brought forth in the so-called "prison letters," namely Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.¹⁴⁵ These letters are so called because it is believed that they were all composed by Paul from prison, though the authorship of some of these letters is disputed. At any rate, in these letters, the author either calls himself a prisoner (such as in Eph 3:1; 4:1; Phlm 1:9), or alludes to his bonds (Phil 1:7,13,14,17; Col 4: 18; Phlm 10:13), or else to his chains (Eph 6:20).¹⁴⁶

Apart from all the other afflictions highlighted in the previous section, the significance of Paul's imprisonment lies in the fact that, apart from the fact that the imprisonment itself forms the backdrop of some of Paul's letters, Paul's captivity was a situation which enabled him to meditate on and evaluate his experiences of suffering, and come to terms with it. From his own captivity, Paul could still voice his enthusiasm for the Gospel, while at the same time being a continuous witness and example for all his fellow believers. His imprisonment is a continuous lesson imparted to the churches in order to learn to embrace persecution as part of their allegiance to Christ.

George B. Caird argues that while it is true that Paul frequently used metaphors, this does not exclude a literal interpretation.¹⁴⁷ One of the strongest examples for a literal interpretation is evident in the Epistle to the Philippians, where the apostle grapples with either life or death as possible outcomes of his

¹⁴² See *ibid.*, 158.

¹⁴³ See Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," 19.

¹⁴⁴ See Daniel G. Reid, "Prison, Prisoner," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 752.

¹⁴⁵ For a detailed analysis of each of the prison letters in relation to Paul's circumstances as prisoner, see Buttigieg, "Colossians 1:24 and Paul's Theology of the Cross."

¹⁴⁶ See Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 1.

¹⁴⁷ See *ibid.*

imprisonment (Phil 1:19-24), where the desired outcome is life, together with favourable circumstances that would enable him to visit the Philippians again, as evident in Phil 1:25-26 and 2:24.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, to use Caird's words: "Whenever Paul was in prison, as he often was, it was because he was Christ's man; and he could be putting the best construction on his shackles by seeing in them the symbols of his captivity to Christ, just as elsewhere he regards the scars left by many floggings as 'the marks of Jesus branded on my body' (Gal 6:17)."¹⁴⁹

Concluding Reflections in the Light of Colossians 1:24

While Paul's reflections are not the overall solution to the problem of suffering, nevertheless his letters are witness to some of the ways in which he came to understand its meaning in the light of his experiences.¹⁵⁰ Christ's death on the cross was the pinnacle of his suffering, which was part and parcel of his life on earth. Following in the steps of Jesus, Paul becomes "a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Phlm 9) and shared the experience of weakness, mockery, and humiliation borne by Jesus, for whose sake he himself suffered in his captivity. Therefore "... rather than questioning the legitimacy of his apostleship because of his suffering, Paul considered suffering to be a characteristic mark of his apostolic ministry ... and an aspect of his own mortal life concerning which he was content, in which he rejoiced and about which he could appropriately 'boast'."¹⁵¹

This is evident in 2 Cor 11:30 and Phil 1:19-26, to take some examples.¹⁵² It must be stressed that Paul's afflictions, in their numerous forms, do not make up for any insufficiency in Christ's death, but, rather, they are endured by Paul for Christ's sake. Indeed as Kruse puts it: "Paul shared the sufferings of the Servant-Messiah inasmuch as he too suffered for the sake of the elect in bringing the Gospel to them."¹⁵³ Paul was aware that his circumstances complied with God's purpose, whose aim was to affirm his divine power, while at the same time bring out "... the reality of the cross and resurrection of Christ in and through Paul's life."¹⁵⁴ This, in turn, enabled the apostle to make more sense of his suffering, and embrace it. What is more, he actually boasted of his afflictions, as already pointed out in 2 Cor 11:23-29.

¹⁴⁸ See Reid, "Prison, Prisoner," 754.

¹⁴⁹ Caird, *Letters from Prison*, 1-2.

¹⁵⁰ See Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," 19.

¹⁵¹ Hafemann, "Suffering," 919.

¹⁵² See *ibid.*

¹⁵³ Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," 20.

¹⁵⁴ Hafemann, "Suffering," 919.

In Phil 3:8,10 the apostle wrote that he counted everything as loss before the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. It is for the sake of Jesus that he had lost all things, in order that he may gain Christ and be found in him; "... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death ..."

While thanks to baptism, the Christian becomes Christ's disciple and a member of Christ's mystical body, so also must the disciple suffer, in order to become like Christ, as Paul himself has done. For Paul, suffering with Christ is a gift of grace, which makes him yearn to suffer more with Christ and for Christ.¹⁵⁵ Hence the significant words of Phil 3:10. What emerges from all the prison letters, apart from the other Pauline letters, is the notion that Paul's tribulations are inextricably bound to his calling and commission as an apostle.¹⁵⁶ Hence Eph 3:13; Phil 1:7; Col 4:3 and Phlm 1.

Therefore, Col 1:24 acquires a special meaning within this context. Paul's mission as an apostle, with all its repercussions, on behalf of the Church, the body of Christ, points at the continuation of the sufferings already borne by Christ, which are not yet exhausted. Even during his imprisonment, Paul's welfare is the welfare of the Gospel. The Gospel has become the fabric of his existence. Even in the most trying of situations, Paul's concern is the spread of the word of God. In Phil 1:7 for example, while he shows his affection for the Philippians, it is evident that for Paul the fulcrum is the defense and vindication of the Gospel. It comes as no surprise, then, that Paul is not really preoccupied with physical confinements and tribulations, which hold little meaning for him, if not in the light of Christ.

Rather, Paul's afflictions have been transmuted into joy because, apart from enabling Paul to emulate Christ, they serve to enhance the spiritual well-being of his converts (Col 1: 24). This notion of joy is especially evident in the letter to the Philippians, where the apostle, coming to terms with his predicament in the light of his calling, drives home the point that a suffering apostle was far from a contradiction. This was the same path trodden by Jesus himself in experiencing the ultimate death sentence. Paul's authority is unwavering, even though he is in shackles (Eph 3:1). As a result, Paul teaches that suffering is not only a source of joy, but it has also a mediatory power.¹⁵⁷ Indeed, Paul's imprisonment has served to actually advance God's word by injecting fresh courage in his followers in order to proclaim the Gospel (Phil 1:12-14).

Paul's experience highlights the importance of giving meaning to one's suffering, especially if the suffering persons are partakers of God's grace and

¹⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, 114.

¹⁵⁶ See Hafemann, "Suffering," 919.

¹⁵⁷ See *ibid.*

followers of the word of God. Believers of the Gospel are beset by persecutions, and in the midst of this turmoil are encouraged to persevere in their belief, with the certainty of the finality of the triumph of the Gospel (Eph 3:13; 6:20). Indeed: "Believers do not find affliction less hurtful than others, but they know that under God's good hand it produces endurance, character and hope in God."¹⁵⁸ Moreover, as Hafemann, points out, in their suffering as witnesses to Christ, fellow believers come to epitomize his death and resurrection in their lives "especially as this is seen in their ability to love others even when they are experiencing affliction."¹⁵⁹ This is evident in such examples as 2 Cor 8:1-2 and 1 Thes 1:2-7.¹⁶⁰

The apostle's experience, itself an example for the community and the believers' glory (Eph 3:13), serves as a reminder that in the face of human persecutions and confinements, the word of God is not confined. It is the beacon in this world with all its darkness, after which it will emerge victorious, true to Christ's promise. After all, Christ in person, with all his suffering, has achieved this victory. The final hope for all believers experiencing afflictions in the footsteps of Christ is the sharing in Christ's final glory.¹⁶¹

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¹⁵⁸ Kruse, "Afflictions, Trials, Hardships," 20.

¹⁵⁹ Hafemann, "Suffering," 920.

¹⁶⁰ See *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ See *ibid.*