



Pastor Kyle Mercer
First in Suffering

August 10, 2025
Series: First
Colossians 1:24-2:5

**BIG IDEA - SUFFERING PRODUCES HOPE, DEEPENS OUR
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, AND STRENGTHENS OUR FAITH**

Good morning, Two Cities Church. Whether you're down in Lexington or in here, I want to take a moment and tell you about Kids Week. Kids Week is not VBS. Okay? We love VBS. We're not against VBS; it's just not what Kids Week is. We did Kids Week two weeks ago. There were 1,300 people in our church who were a part of it. It's when we serve the city together as families in Jesus' name.

Now, here's the truth: we love our city. I told those of you who were with us when we came here to Winston-Salem that we did not come with a church vision only, like, "Oh, we want to be *this* type of church"; we came with a city vision. We wanted to reach, serve, bless, and pray for our city. Here's the truth: if tomorrow, somehow, Two Cities Church disappeared, we'd want our city to be sad. We'd want them to be like, "Man! You guys had an impact and an influence (hopefully in Jesus' name) in this city."

Now, I could tell you the stats...16 organizations, 10 schools, and all that kind of stuff, but I just want to tell you one story I thought was really interesting. When we were out in the community, there was this fourth grader... I don't know where his parents are, but they're doing a good job.

There was this fourth grader, and I guess he was so godly and kind and well behaved that one of the ladies we were ministering to said, "All right. Whose kid is this?" and she said, "If your church produces kids like this, I need to get my kid into your church, because I want to raise a son like this."

Thank you, by the way. Let's give one round of applause to all of the volunteers and staff. We want to have a healthy honor culture here. Seriously. Think... Not today. No pressure. But when you pick up your kids... I mean, a lot of you drop your kids off, and you're so grateful to have an hour and a half where someone else is responsible for them and teaching them the gospel and all that kind of stuff.

Let me just encourage you. When you pick your kids up... You probably already do this, but how about saying "Thank you"? Just a "Thank you," just gratitude, maybe a hug, maybe an occasional gift card. Just say, "Thank you so much for your investment in my kids."

By the way, last Sunday night (I'm still trying to give you guys FOMO so you'll come), we had our first Food Trucks at Five. Look at this drone footage. We even got the drone out there. Look at that. Guys, we had 1,000 adults who came at night. We normally have 500 or 600. We were kind of ready for that. We weren't ready for the almost 300 kids. There were scooters. There were bikes.

Why am I telling you this? Guys, we're going to do this every week. If you were here last week for it... Pray for the food trucks, because we're trying to figure out how to streamline that process. We're getting better. We have more trucks coming this week. We're going to do this every week after the 5:00 service, weather permitting, all the way through October.

Finally, when you came in, you got this Heights card, whether you're in Lexington or here in Winston. Guys, The Heights... I'm not going to do my whole thing on it. I've talked about it. It's going to be incredible. The final night of The Heights, which is Saturday night, is the night to invite. Invite all the time.

By the way, I never wanted to lead the type of church where I have to get up here and go, "Please invite your friends." I just want you to be like, "I love this church so much I can't stand it. I have to tell everybody." With that said, we wanted to uniquely say, "Hey, on Saturday night..."

Lexington is going to have their own Heights experience down at their campus. We're going to have our own Heights experience to free up space and for each of the campuses to be able to invite people, because Clayton King is just a unique guy who is able to uniquely share the gospel and call people to respond, and we want to make as much space as possible. So, with that said, let's pray, and then we'll get to work.

Lord, I pray that we would take the Heights card seriously, starting with myself, that we would think, "Is there somebody far from God and close to me that I've made the

relational deposits to make the withdrawal of an invitation?" We know Christianity is both a "Come and see" and a "Go and tell" faith.

All week, we go and tell, but we have opportunities (we think The Heights is a great one) to say, "Come and see." Would you give us the courage? Would you open up our eyes to see the needs around us and to invite people to hear and respond to the gospel? We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, you may have heard this saying before. It's a famous saying. It's a very true saying. Here's what it is: "Suffering introduces a man to himself." I mean, how do you know yourself? How do you even know what you believe? Well, you'll find out when you suffer. Look. If you get the cancer diagnosis, you're going to find out really soon what you believe. Not what you *think* you believe. Who knows what you believe? You have to go through suffering to see.

You might go through suffering and find out you are a very selfish person. Here's what I've seen. I've seen people go through basically the exact same suffering, and one of them becomes better, and one of them becomes bitter. Suffering is a sanctifying and purifying process, and today we're going to talk about suffering. Look. This is not something I'm looking forward to doing, but if you turn to Colossians 1:24 (I'm going to meet you there in one minute), Paul talks about suffering.

There are two reasons I have to talk about suffering. First, the Bible addresses it consistently, directly, and repeatedly. I wasn't ready for this. When I started teaching and preaching, this church was the first church where I ever just preached through books of the Bible, and I was the main teacher, preacher, and communicator.

I knew I had to get ready for some things. I was like, "All right. They're going to hear all of my stories. They're going to hear all of my definitions. They're going to hear all of my jokes." It's hard to preach to the same people every week. I had to prepare for that.

Then I thought, "Okay. Well, I'm going to have to talk about sex even though they don't want me to, and I'm going to have to talk about money even though they don't want me to. I'm going to have to talk about things like forgiveness, because there's a lot of bitterness..." I knew all that. I just wasn't ready (I'm *still* kind of not ready) for how much the Bible talks about suffering.

The second reason I have to talk about suffering... It's hard, because I look at some of you, and you're young and healthy and had great parents (that's a good thing), so maybe you haven't suffered much. Here's the truth: the longer you live and the more people you love, the more you're going to suffer. Every time you love somebody, you are inviting suffering into your life, and the longer you live, the more you're going to suffer.

Last night, Margy and I had our little date night, and we went to this restaurant. I'd been there one time before. She'd never been there. I walked in, and I was like, "I think we went to the old person restaurant." I mean, it was 5:32, so it was kind of early, but I was like, "Everybody in here is 75-plus." So, I was walking by some people (this is true), and there were these two couples, these four older people.

You know what it's like when you're kind of eavesdropping as you're walking to your table. "Hmm, what's going on there?" They were talking about their funerals...where they would want to have it, where they'd want to be buried, who they'd want to do it, and where they'd want to have the party afterward. I was like, "Whoa." The more people you love and the longer you live, the more you're going to suffer.

Basically, guys, we have to get ready for it. Part of my job is to prepare you guys to suffer. When I was a new pastor, a guy told me, "Your job is to hatch, match, patch, and dispatch," which sounds like a Dr. Seuss novel. Right? *Hatch*. "Oh, look. Let's dedicate the baby." *Match*. "Oh, they're getting married." But a large part of ministry is *patching* and *dispatching* people, helping people suffer well and die well.

With that said, let's read verse 24 of chapter 1. ***"Now I rejoice in my sufferings..."*** We should stop and go, "That's insane. Who talks like that?" Don't read the Bible and be like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I believe this too." *Do* you? You should be confused when you read that. ***"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..."***

So, we're going to talk about sufferings. I'm going to get into rejoicing in sufferings and that strange phrase. What does *that* mean? "To fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church." First, suffering. What is suffering? *Suffering* is any time pain and loss come into your life. That's the broadest definition of suffering. You or someone you love experiences pain and/or loss. That's not fun for any of us.

The problem is suffering is so subjective. What *you* might consider suffering somebody else wouldn't consider suffering, and what somebody else would consider suffering *you* wouldn't consider suffering. For example, it got pretty hot. I'm from Pittsburgh, so these are some hot, humid summers down here. It gets to 95, and then you look on your app and do the... Do you ever do the "feels like"? "Feels like 103." I'm like, "What?" You know, the humidity.

Now, this summer, if you had to be in your house or apartment, or wherever you are, without air conditioning, I guarantee you would feel like you're suffering, even though most of the people in the world don't have air conditioning to this day, and even though

none of our ancestors had air conditioning until 50 years ago. You can chart the explosion of Scottsdale, Arizona, and the creation of the air conditioning unit. They happened at the exact same time, because you couldn't live in Scottsdale until there was an air conditioning unit.

Listen. The pickleball courts being crowded is not suffering. Not being able to get a Wi-Fi signal is not suffering. Not being able to get an aisle seat on the airplane is not suffering. In the next 40 minutes, I'm going to give you basically everything I know about suffering from ministering to people and from reading the Bible.

The first thing you have to know... It just helps. We need language. We need categories. There are five types of suffering. So, when someone says, "I'm suffering," it's like, "Well, *how* are you suffering?" There are usually five ways. There's *physical* suffering. Paul is suffering physically. He's chained. He's in prison. He can't go anywhere. Physical suffering... You can just write down "illness and injury." You know, you get the diagnosis. You have the chronic illness.

If it's not illness and injury, it's aging and accidents. All of a sudden, you're in some office, and you have some part of your body that isn't working anymore. By the way, this is what we tend to think of the most. Whenever there are prayer requests, our minds normally go to, "Is there anybody I know who's physically suffering?" And we *should* pray for those people, but I'm not going to talk about that one for long, because that's the one everyone thinks about.

The second one is *mental* or *emotional* suffering. It's all combined, but what I mean by that... If physical suffering is a broken body, mental or emotional suffering is a broken brain, or we might say a broken mind. I had a friend in high school. He was second in his class, only because the girl who was first in our class went to Harvard.

He was super smart. He ran cross-country. He was super fast. I remember he was so fit that when he would drink out of the water fountain, he would bend at the waist because his abs would keep him straight. Literally. He went to the Naval Academy. Do you know how hard it is to get into the Naval Academy?

He went to the Naval Academy, and I was thinking, "This guy is going to kill it at the Naval Academy." The first three weeks he was there... It's a mixture of the physical discipline, the way the upperclassmen treat you, the lack of sleep, and what you have to memorize. I don't even know it all, but he had a mental breakdown there. This was 22 years ago. He hasn't recovered from it.

He had to leave. He was diagnosed with bipolar. There's nothing wrong with this, but last I heard, he was working part time at Panera. He loves the Lord, but he just can't figure it

out upstairs. He's trying to trust Christ in the midst of a lot of suffering that has happened. I mean, to go from the Naval Academy to "I can't put it together..."

There's *relational* suffering. We call this *marriage*. A lot of marriages are two people with both of their hands around each other's necks, slowly choking each other for 25 years. That's what a lot of marriages are. Marriage is really hard on people. This is why you're like, "I didn't know I was an angry person until I got married." It's like, "No, you never suffered until you got married, and in suffering you met yourself."

You know, married people are miserable sometimes because it's not working out like they thought it would. Then, single people can think, "I want to start my life. I need a spouse, and I want to have kids, and I want to get my life started." Then there's other relational suffering. You know, people have terrible relationships with their parents or with their siblings or something happened in business, and they were betrayed.

There's *financial* suffering. Some of you... It depends on the home you grew up in. Like, you grew up in a great home, your parents were wealthy, you went to the best schools, and you got a good job. You've never had to suffer financially. But when you have to suffer financially...

When you are so poor you can't even pay attention, when you are to the place where (I'm not even talking about abject poverty) your friend is talking about going to see a movie, and you're like, "I don't have the eight bucks to see it, and if I do that, that's going to affect a meal I have," it wears on you. When you're constantly thinking about money... "I'd like to get my kids something for Christmas, but we don't have any money to get anyone anything for Christmas."

You can imagine. Imagine all of these... Paul had all of these, by the way. He had to deal with all this stuff. Then it gets worse. There's a unique type of suffering that Christians go through. The world and everybody goes through those four, but then there's unique Christian suffering, which falls into three categories.

There's *demonic opposition*. When you decide to follow Christ, Satan puts a target on your back. Paul would talk about this all the time. It's like, all of a sudden, everything you're doing is harder. It feels like you're running into a stiff headwind for an hour.

There's *persecution*. That's particularly what Paul was talking about. That's when you suffer because you speak for Christ.

Then, here's one I never hear talked about. Here's a big theological word for your Sunday morning. There's *mortification*. *Mortification* is the theological word meaning to put sin to death in your life. On the other side of putting sin to death, what is there? Oh, there is joy, there is grace, there is peace, there is the pleasure of obedience, there are spiritual

pleasures, and all that, but in the process of putting sin to death, if you've ever tried to do it...

Have you ever tried to give up some sinful habit you kind of enjoyed and was a kind of escape in your life? Why can't you give it up? Because it hurts. Paul says these are the types of suffering, but then he says this. I'll just read it. I already read it, but let's read it one more time. Verse 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..."***

Paul doesn't just say, "I endure my suffering." Now, he *does* say that other places. Paul will say, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect." I just quoted Scripture. Paul is like, "I want to reach a lot of people, and I don't know who I'm going to reach. I don't know who's going to believe, but I suffer knowing that people will believe in Jesus Christ because of my suffering."

He says, "I suffer to fill up what's lacking in Christ's afflictions." I'll get there in a second and tell you what that means. It's amazing that Paul says he rejoices in it, and the reason he rejoices in it is because of what it's accomplishing. I don't know a lot of you, but one thing I know about you (because it's the same about me and all of us) is the one thing we can't handle is pointless and meaningless suffering. It will either drive you mad or drive you malevolent.

Why do we say, "Hurt people hurt people"? It's a truism. It's because if you're hurt and you don't process your pain, you transfer it. So, we're talking about suffering. He doesn't just endure it. He says he rejoices in it, because he believes suffering is purposeful, and what's on the other side of his suffering is a good that is greater than the suffering he's going through.

Here's what I know about us also. Most of us have had seasons in our lives where we went through purposeful suffering because we were excited about what it was going to lead to. For example, if you've ever gotten into working out or lifting or running or doing some exercises... Because you could ask this question. Just so you know, I try not to talk about health and fitness stuff too much and make people feel insecure and all that.

Why isn't everybody in here in great shape? I mean, you have the time. We have more time than any humans have ever had in the history of the world, so that's not an issue. Why are you not in great shape? Because it's hard. Have you ever met somebody who runs? Like, not "wogs," between a walk and a jog. I'm talking about someone who knows how to run.

Have you ever talked to someone who has trained for a triathlon or something? It's like, "How much suffering can I endure?" These Burn Boot Camps, or whatever you call them, this Orangetheory you guys are into, this CrossFit... All of it is pain. It's also why people get stuck at certain levels. It's like, "Well, you're just not willing to go through the suffering necessary to get to the next stage."

This is what education is. You know, you meet a doctor. (I'm just picking on that profession because it's the easiest one to do in this.) There is so much suffering in getting your education. It's like, organic chemistry, then four years of medical school, then residency and fellowship, and congratulations, you're 33 and got your first job. What are people doing?

It's like, "You gave your entire youth to this? You moved your family three or four different times to get into these different... What are you doing?" The answer is there's suffering. "You're getting paid terribly as a resident, and you're working incredibly crazy, goofy hours. What's going on? Oh, you're doing this because you see the result."

This is childbirth. I've been in the room for three kids being born, and every time, I was like, "She's never doing *that* again." No matter how much epidural you give them, it's hurtful. But at the end, they're like, "Let's do that again," because it's the joy on the other side of the pain.

Now, here's what we do. Instead of rejoicing in our suffering, we avoid suffering at all costs. Westerners are the worst at suffering for one reason: we don't believe there's anything redemptive in suffering. You have to come from a uniquely Christian, biblical worldview to believe there's anything redemptive in suffering.

Here's what you're going to naturally believe. In fact, when I describe this, you're going to feel this, I think. This is how the average American, even the average American Christian, views suffering: an intrusion, an invasion, and an interruption into everything else I wanted to do with my life.

As Americans, we think the two greatest things to be in life are to be free and to be happy. If all of a sudden I have some chronic illness... By the way, that's why there's a sinful logic to euthanasia and assisted suicide. If we die and disappear and life is all about *here* and the purpose of my life is to be happy and free, then the moment I feel like that's not it, then I get to end this life.

In fact, we avoid suffering... I don't know what to do about this, because I do the same thing. We avoid suffering. Some of it's wisdom, but we avoid suffering at all costs. As soon as people get enough money, they put it toward avoiding suffering: life insurance (so my kids and my wife won't suffer), disability insurance (so if I get hurt at work I'll be

okay), health insurance (so if I get sick I'll be okay), flood insurance, car insurance. We pay for peace of mind.

And let's be honest. As soon as we can get out of the bad neighborhood, we do. As soon as we can send our kids to a better school, we do. I'm not saying any of that's wrong, but you have to understand... Paul is like, "I have a totally different perspective."

I was talking to a pastor, and he... This is not for everybody. I'm not telling you you need to do this. He's a pastor who pastors in downtown Atlanta, and he sends his kids to the horrible public school system in downtown Atlanta. These are his words. He said, "The reason I had to do that is I won't care about those kids' problems until those problems become *my* problems." I was like, "That's a really... Because you could definitely afford not to send your kids there."

Some of you are going, "That's irresponsible." Maybe. I don't know. That's another thing about suffering, by the way. Paul was willing to suffer more when he was alone. When did Paul leave places, and when did he not? He left if others were with him. He stayed if he was alone. You know, you're not an island. But we tend to avoid suffering.

Now, Paul says he rejoices in his suffering. Then, look at what he says here. He says, ***"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, the second half of that verse can sound blasphemous. It's like, "What is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church?"

I mean, isn't every song we sing about how Christ has done enough? Aren't we a Bible-saturated...whatever you want to say...Christ-centered, cross-focused church? We're going to talk about the bloody cross and the empty tomb. What do you mean, "what's lacking in Christ's afflictions"? At one level, the answer is "Nothing." We can't add anything to the accomplishment or achievement of what Christ did on the cross.

But that's not what Paul is saying. Here's what he's saying: Christ by his suffering *provided* salvation, and by *our* suffering, we *preach* salvation. He's saying it took Christ's sufferings to *secure* our salvation, but it will be *our* sufferings that will *spread* salvation. Here's the whole thing: there is no way to get the gospel to other people without suffering.

Some of you are looking for a loophole, and you need to start looking for grace. There's no loophole. You're not going to find it on an Instagram Reel. There's no hack. "Ten Easy Ways to Share the Gospel With People So They Never Get Upset." That's not real.

In fact, Paul understood an unbreakable pattern in Scripture. If you remember nothing else I say, hopefully... And you don't even need to write this down it's so simple. There's an unbreakable pattern in Scripture, and here it is: "I believe; therefore, I speak; therefore, I suffer." If you're not suffering, it might be that you're not speaking, and if you're not speaking, it might be that you're not believing.

Think about it. Do you really believe in heaven and hell? I mean, you have to think about that for a while. Do you believe in eternal conscious torment of those who don't know and love Christ? Do you believe the Bible is the written-down Word of God? Do you believe people are not just bodies but souls and will live forever? Do you believe sin is real and will be punished? Do you believe in a final judgment? Those are just some of the big categories.

Do you believe what the Bible says about sexual ethics, or whatever it is? If you're like, "I believe this," then you're going to speak. I know, based on your temperament and your personality... I get all that. Where you live, learn, work, and play, but you're going to speak. You're going to be like, "I have to speak about this. I believe this. Someone else is saying something that's different than this" or "This is an opportunity to share with somebody." If you believe and you speak, you will suffer.

Here's what I'm trying to say. The point of this message is not "Pursue suffering." Suffering will find you. You don't need to find it. You don't need to do what the old priests did. You don't need to lie on wooden boards, hit yourself, and sleep in sackcloth. That's all silly religious stuff.

What you need to do is say, "I believe. I'm committed to believing what God said and speaking when I have the opportunity, and then I just leave the results up to God." I don't know how much you're going to suffer. In North Korea, it's "I believe. I speak. I die." There's no getting around this pattern.

So, Paul says, "I fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Then he says this. Look at verse 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..."** When Paul says, "I became a minister..." We tend to think of the word *minister* in really formal settings. This is what happens to words over time and tradition. We move so far away from what that word means.

Everybody here calls me *pastor*. You know, "Pastor Kyle." Even a more formal way is to say *minister*. If anybody calls me a minister, they're usually 75 years or older or they're not in church. That'll happen all the time. "Oh, so you're a minister?" I'm like,

"Uh...yeah." Well, let me explain what that means. We even take the word and throw it on titles for government in other countries. *Prime minister*. That sounds important.

Do you know what the word *minister* means? Servant. That's it. It's not even an office. The office is apostle. Paul is like, "But I'm a minister." When it says *servant*, it's not even waiter, because a waiter is too high of an office. A waiter is, like, you know my name, I take your order, I get a tip, and all that. Today, it literally would be translated *busboy*. I bring the food. I clean the table. It's not about me. I'm here to serve you and serve the waiter.

Part of the reason we're unwilling to suffer is we're unwilling to see ourselves as servants. We're called to salvation, we're called to sanctification, and we're called to service. It's interesting, because what I'm seeing in the business world... You know, I'll be in the airport, or whatever, and I always look at what the popular books are. There are all of these books on servant leadership.

I know what they mean. I get the idea. Sometimes they point to Scripture and the example of Chick-fil-A, and all that's good. But what about just being a servant? Here's a principle you're not going to like: *you cannot serve without suffering*. Part of the problem, why some of you are so stunted in your spiritual growth, is you are trying to figure out how to serve without suffering. I see this all the time.

It's not all about our church. I'll give you other examples, but in our church, this happens all the time. We have what's called a *high-commitment culture*, and people are not used to that. "Well, I just thought I'd come and go and do whatever I..." I remember one guy came. He visited us from another church. His church was doing something he didn't like that day, so he came to our church. Like, "Oh my goodness. Do not come here." Seriously.

He came, and then he said to me afterward, "This church is one of those churches where you want people to do something." Is there any other type of church? So, high-commitment culture. Some of you are trying to figure out... You've never served here or have fallen off the serving train or whatever it is. Here's the thing: you're trying to figure out how to serve here so you don't have to suffer.

"Is there a position...? I'm very busy. Maybe there's a unique serving opportunity for me, because I'm very important. My schedule is very busy. Not everybody else's schedule is as busy as *my* schedule. My kids play so many athletics. You wouldn't even understand." There is no way for you to serve without inconveniencing yourself and suffering. You can't do it. God didn't make the world that way. Jesus Christ had to suffer in order to serve us, and you think *you're* the exception?

There's no way to be a dad without suffering. Some of you are trying to figure out... "I'm going to be the greatest dad ever, and I'm going to play with my..." You're going to have to suffer, because the principle of being a dad is "I go to them because they can't come to me." You keep wanting *them* to do all *your* stuff. It doesn't work that way. *You* go to *them*. Go read Ephesians 5. There's no way to be a husband or a wife without suffering. It's like, okay, you're really going to serve.

Some of you are so far behind, you're just going to have to start taking baby steps. Don't give yourself too much trouble, but are you willing to inconvenience yourself? You love your creature comforts so much, it's ridiculous. Paul says, "Guys, I am a servant, and I embrace suffering." Suffering is the strategy. If you want to know how we got from 12 Christians to a billion Christians today, the answer is suffering.

Then Paul says he's a steward. Look. He says, "**...of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you...**" I don't have a lot of time to talk about this, but I want to talk about stewardship, which I hope you understand, because it's a massive theme in the Bible.

It's the whole idea that everything you own is really on loan from God. It's the whole idea that you are given things that are not yours, and you are to be responsible for them, you will be accountable for them, and, if acted properly, you will be rewarded for them.

By the way, you get this principle of stewardship as soon as you have kids. My kids are older now, 13, 11, and 9. When they are fighting over who gets to watch the TV, or something like that, I'm like, "Guys, that's not your TV. That's *my* TV." Or, "He's in my room." "You don't have a room. These are all *my* rooms."

I say it sometimes nicely, but the whole idea is... And here's the thing. Every parent feels this way. It's like, "Guys, it's all mine..." And they're for God, but I'm saying, in my relationship with my kids, it's like, "It's all mine, and I want you to share it." So, "It's mine, and I want you to share it." That's what stewardship is.

There are five types of stewardship. They all start with *T*, because I needed to make it easy...*temple, time, talent, treasure, truth*. Here's what I want to talk about for a minute, because here's what I really want to tell you: we don't steward things the same way the world stewards them. Let's talk about your *temple*, for example. That's your body. Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. So, think about your body.

If this was some worldly talk I was giving, some TED Talk about stewardship, I'd be like, "All right, self-care." You know, "Eat and exercise and get your vitamin D," and all that. Here's what I mean by *stewardship*: if you're going to steward what God has given you,

you have to look past this life into eternity. Here's a principle of stewardship: I don't hold on too tightly to anything God has given me, including my body.

I know a guy. He's not in our church. I wish he was. He's a great guy in our city. I found out he gave somebody a kidney. It wasn't even his relative. He just found out someone he knew needed a kidney. I'd like to think I'm a decent Christian, and I thought to myself, "I don't think I'd do that." I looked it up. You only get two of those. This guy is not that old. I'm literally sitting there, going, "You're going to live off one kidney for the rest...?"

I mean, I hate to tell you. Those were some of the thoughts that went through my mind. I didn't say that to him. I was like, "You're amazing." I'm thinking, "What? You're going to live with one kidney for the rest...? What if something happens to you and *you* need a kidney now?" I've met people on dialysis. I thought, "This guy is thinking differently." He's not holding on to his body too tightly. "It's going to get old, and I'm going to get a new one."

There's your *time*. We can't be like, "If this is it, if this is the only life we get, then we have to hold on to our time. We have to go to Europe three times a year, and we have to..." The Christian doesn't view it that way. "I can't use any of my vacation to go on a mission trip because..." Somehow, God created the world so that what happens in time echoes in eternity. I get such a short amount of time here, and I want to... As Jim Elliott said, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

There are your *talents*. Paul goes, "The stewardship from God for you." In other words, what God has given with the gift set we have... It is for you at one level, and it's going to bless you and bless your family and help you provide, but also, the perspective is "How can I leverage the gifts God has given me for Christ and his kingdom?"

Then there's *treasure*, which is our money, our possessions, our finances. It was interesting. About a year ago, I ended up having lunch with... This guy is not in our church, but he's an older guy, maybe in his 60s. He's not that old, but he's wealthier. (I'm telling you all this for a reason.) He always wants to share book ideas with me. "What are you reading?" And we're sharing with each other.

He was like, "Man, I just read the greatest book." It's called *Die With Zero*. This is not an endorsement of the book. It may be terrible. But he said it was profound, because the whole book is written to Boomers who basically are dying with so much because everybody is afraid they're going to be in some assisted living home for 14 years at \$15,000 a month.

He said what's happening is people are dying at, like, 92 years old and giving an enormous amount of money to their 68-year-old children who don't need it. The whole

book is about what it would look like to be more strategic with all the money you have while you can share it with others.

I'm like, "Oh, that book is halfway there," because the Bible says, Jesus says (Randy Alcorn says it this way as well) that we can't take any money with us, but we *can* send it on ahead through generosity and benevolence toward others. I've told you the definition of Christian contentment is "God will take care of me." We can trust God with our money, and we can be generous in ways the world can't because of where our hope is.

Finally, there's *truth*. That's that we are responsible to share what we know about God's Word with other people. That's what Paul says. He says, **"...to make the word of God fully known..."** If you're new, you may not know this. One of the things we do here is we just walk through books of the Bible verse by verse. We're going to be in Colossians, and we won't skip a verse in this book.

I've been doing this for nine years now, and I just added it up in preparation for this message. Just in nine years, I've been able to preach fully through 20 books of the Bible. That's almost a third of our Bible. So, if you keep coming around, I think we're going to get through the whole thing, maybe. We'll see. You're going to know all of these different parts of Scripture, but the scary thing about that is then you're going to be accountable for what you know, both in obedience as well as sharing with others.

Paul says, "I share this mystery." Look at this. Verse 26: **"...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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."**

Paul goes, "What I love to talk to people about is the mystery." When we think of mystery, we think of something we need to discover and figure out. We think, like, "Get Sherlock Holmes," or whatever. "We need to figure out this mystery." In the New Testament, mystery is something we did not know and could not have known if God did not reveal it, but now we know it.

He says, "Here's the mystery: Christ in you." Now, that's interesting. I told you this a couple of weeks ago. The phrase *in Christ* is used all the time. It's Paul's favorite phrase. He uses it 43 times or 33 times, or whatever it is, in Colossians. The phrase *Christ in you* is used way less. *In Christ* speaks to our status, our security, our salvation in Christ. *Christ in us* speaks of the experience of knowing God personally.

What he's saying is there was this mystery in the Old Testament that Christ would be in us and that the message would go to the Jew and to the Gentile. Then he says, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." I think this is another key. Why would Paul say all this in the

midst of his suffering? Because what he's saying is the Christian has a hope of glory. Let me say it this way: the Christian gets grace in *this* life and glory in the next.

Too many of us... I don't know if it's what our parents told us about ourselves. I don't know if it's all the time we've spent on Instagram. We have too many expectations of glory in this life. Paul is like, "Guys, you're really going to struggle to suffer if what you think you're getting in this life is glory." Paul is like, "I could suffer, because glory is in the next life, grace is in *this* life, and God's grace will sustain me in my suffering."

In fact, Paul says right after that, "***Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.***" I'm going to come back and talk about that next week, because Paul talks about his strategy of discipleship and evangelism and growing people up, and I want you to see that Paul thought the goal of his ministry was maturity.

The goal of ministry is not for people to be comfortable and complacent and learn new information; the goal of ministry is for maturity to take place. Paul goes, "For that to happen, I have to warn them, I have to teach, and I have to preach." Paul said that was all really, really hard. In fact, look at what he says right after that. He says, "I preach, and I teach, and I warn," and then he says, "***For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.***"

Paul is like, "I'm preaching, I'm teaching, and I'm warning, and it's wearing me out." It's interesting. I don't mean at all to make this about me, but I've been trying to figure out for nine years how to make preaching easy for myself. I'm like, "There has to be an easier way to do this. There has to be an easier way to write a sermon." But I'm nine years in, and it's still hard.

You know, there are multiple services. I'm like, "There has to be a way to do three services and it not affect my body." I don't know how to do it. There is a suffering intrinsic in Christian ministry of all kinds. Paul says he toils. It literally means "I work to the point of exhaustion." I heard one pastor say, "Pray not for God to lessen your load but to broaden your shoulders."

Paul says, "I toil," and then he says the word *struggling*, which is the word *agonize*. It means to wrestle. It's interesting. In chapter 4 of Colossians...same book, same word *struggling*...Paul says, "Epaphras is always struggling for you in his prayers." We think what Paul is talking about here is that one of Paul's... Paul is like, "I'm suffering physically, mentally," and all that. Then he goes, "And I'm struggling in prayer."

What do you do when you get a prayer request from somebody? You get a text, an email, or whatever, and you say you're going to pray for them. If you remember to pray for

them, is it really... I'm not trying to guilt you. I'm just trying to show you the difference between us and Paul. I'm guessing usually, for most people, it's a short prayer, but you remember them, and maybe you text them that you prayed for them.

Paul goes, "I turn the promises of God into prayers for people, and I wrestle with God's Word to the point of exhaustion in praying for people." In fact, Paul says, "I want you to know I'm struggling." Chapter 2, verse 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..."*** Paul is suffering, but he's worried about other people. Wow.

"...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, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

Paul is worried that *they're* suffering. He doesn't know all of the details. He heard some things from Epaphras. He's suffering. He's trying to let them know he rejoices in his suffering. He's worried that maybe *they're* suffering, and he says, "I want you to be encouraged."

Let me tell you this as we close. Satan has two strategies to derail you in suffering. The first is to discourage you. Christian, I want to speak to you. Some of you are discouraged. Here's what it means to be discouraged: to lack courage, to lack optimism, to lack confidence, to lack hope. I'm telling you, Christian, Satan's greatest strategy is to discourage the Christian. It's the only thing he has left.

If your sins are forgiven, the Holy Spirit is inside of you, you're headed to heaven, the church is your family, you have the Word of God, you have the powerful gospel message, and you have the ability to say "no" to sin, what does Satan have left? Just to discourage you from even trying. And we've all been there. We all know, to some level, what that discouragement feels like.

Some of you are so discouraged in your marriage. You're like, "It has been 18 years, and there have only been two good years, and they were a long time ago." People will get discouraged in their battle with sin, because they're like, "I told myself if I did it again, I would tell somebody, but I did it again, and I didn't tell somebody."

People are discouraged with their kids. People are discouraged in their spiritual disciplines. "I said I'd read the Bible in a year, and I failed. Then I said I would just do the New Testament in a year, and I'm so terrible I couldn't even do *that*." Paul says, "I want to put courage in you. I do not want you to be discouraged. You have so much hope, the hope of glory."

Nothing can discourage a person more than suffering. You might start to think, "God is against me," which is why Paul says the second thing. Look at verse 4. ***"I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments."*** They might make sense. They sound like they make sense. ***"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."***

Paul says, "I don't want you to be deceived. I don't want you to be discouraged, but I don't want you to be deceived. I don't want you to start suffering and start thinking things that are untrue, thinking that God is against you and God is not for you and all of these dark thoughts."

By the way, the problem with being deceived is you don't know when it's happening. If you did, you wouldn't be deceived. That's the problem with it. It's like, are you being deceived? You wouldn't know it if you were, because that's the definition of being deceived.

It's interesting. Edmund Burke... It's not that important that you know who he is, but he was a critic of the French Revolution. He had this unbelievable phrase. He called it *pleasing illusions*. He said what has encapsulated humans for so long is pleasing illusions or the lies we like to believe.

We believe these lies because we like how they make us feel, even if the lie is "You're a good person. All you have to do is die, and you get to go to heaven." We love to live under the illusion that we're the main character in the story and the most important person on earth.

Here's what I'm thinking. As I was preparing to teach this, I was thinking to myself... It's going to take way more than one sermon, but how do we prepare, and how do we create a church where we can suffer together, where we're ready to encourage one another and walk each other through? What would it look like if our church began, individually...each Christian, family, home, and all that...to have the same perspective toward suffering that Paul did?

If you'll bow your head and close your eyes, I want to give you a chance to think about this as I read you a couple of other Scriptures to encourage you, because some of you, in a room this size, are suffering right now. I want to tell you there are many promises in your suffering. I want to read to you from Romans 5. ***"Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope..."***

I want to let you know, if you're suffering right now, God is producing in you endurance and hope. What happens when we suffer is God, in his grace, weans us from the world.

When your body begins to break down, when you lose a loved one, what happens every time that happens in your life... And the older you get, the more it'll happen. You'll wake up one day, and you'll find more and more of your heart is in heaven.

If you've been through a hard season, I want to let you know God is working hope in you. He's working endurance in you. The Bible says in 1 Peter 4, "Beloved, don't be surprised at the fiery trial that has come upon you as though it were strange, but rejoice as you share in Christ's sufferings. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."

The Bible says that when a person goes through suffering, whether you're in it now or you're going to go through it... It says the Spirit of glory and the Spirit of God rests upon you. The Bible says God is uniquely close to the brokenhearted. Jesus says this in his famous sermon: ***"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."***

If you're suffering, I want you to know there is a reward on the other end of that suffering. Part of what's so painful about suffering is we see no end to it. We feel like nobody sees it. Some of you are really serving in a way... You're serving your parents. You're serving your special needs child. You are serving in ways that nobody sees. God says, "That is the kind of serving in secret I love to reward."

Lord, would you help us to live like the apostle Paul? Lord, I pray no one in here would be discouraged. We have so much in the gospel to be encouraged about. Lord, I pray that you would teach us, as a church, through our Community Groups and other ways, to come alongside one another, Lord, as we walk through the hurts, hardships, and heartaches we're going to go through as individuals and as families, that we would see much grace in this life and we would hope for much glory in the next. In Jesus' name we ask, amen.