

Held Together:
The Ministry that Holds It All Together
Colossians 1:24-2:5

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Text Introduction: We are working our way through the book of Colossians. A key phrase of Colossians comes in Colossians 1:17, “And by Him all things hold together.” I love this phrase. This phrase speaks to the preeminence of Jesus. He is all things. If He is all things, He must be first place in my life.

So, we are working through this letter to discover all the ways and in all the things that He holds us together. We started out by saying, “He holds it all together by the Gospel.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ holds us together when everything around us is falling apart. Then, we noted that God gave us the tool called prayer to hold us together. Last week, we looked at the “Theology that Holds It All Together.” God revealed Himself to us in Jesus. Our response is that He would come to have first place in everything.

This brings us to the next passage. Paul takes this theology and applies it to himself as a minister of the Gospel. There is a ministry that holds all things together. That is, if we could, as individuals first, and then as a church keep this ministry as our focus, I am more than convinced that such purpose would keep all things together. Let’s read the text.

Text: Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and I am completing in my flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for His body, that is, the church. ²⁵ I have become its servant, according to God’s administration that was given to me for you, to make God’s message fully known, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints. ²⁷ God wanted to make known among the Gentiles the glorious wealth of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸ We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ I labor for this, striving with His strength that works powerfully in me.

2 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me in person. ² I want their hearts to be encouraged and joined together in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery—Christ. ³ All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him.

⁴ I am saying this so that no one will deceive you with persuasive arguments. ⁵ For I may be absent in body, but I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see how well ordered you are and the strength of your faith in Christ.

Introduction: In England there is a church built in 1650’s by the vision and leadership of Sir Robert Shirley Baronet. This was a tumultuous season. Those loyal to the king and those against the royal throne were hashing out their battle. Above the door of this church is this inscription.

“In the year 1654 when all things were, throughout this nation, either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, founded and built this church. He it is whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst times ...

Can you relate?

The Apostle Paul, writing, I remind you, from prison. For him, certainly this was the worst of times.

To the Corinthians he described his life in these terms:

Five times I received 39 lashes from Jews.

²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods by the Romans.

Once I was stoned by my enemies.

Three times I was shipwrecked.

I have spent a night and a day
in the open sea.

²⁶ On frequent journeys, I faced

dangers from rivers,

dangers from robbers,

dangers from my own people,

dangers from the Gentiles,

dangers in the city,

dangers in the open country,

dangers on the sea,

and dangers among false brothers;

²⁷ labor and hardship,

many sleepless nights, hunger and thirst,

often without food, cold, and lacking clothing.

²⁸ Not to mention other things, there is the daily pressure on me: my care for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation? ³⁰ If boasting is necessary, I will boast about my weaknesses. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is praised forever, knows I am not lying. ³² In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of the Damascenes in order to arrest me, ³³ so I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. (2 Corinthians 11:25-33)

But in these worst of times, he had a mission. He had a calling. He had a ministry. And so, even in prison, he stayed focused on that ministry.

There is no short list of things that are bad in our world. It seems that not a day goes by that we are not losing more ground instead of taking ground for the kingdom of God. We might be tempted to say, "What's the point?" But in these worst of times, we can and we must be about the best of things.

We must have that singular focus. ***The ministry of reconciling the world to God is a ministry of endurance.***

I want you to notice several things about that calling to endurance and then we will make several points of application.

The Gospel signals endurance.

The first reason that we can say we are called to a ministry of endurance is because Jesus endured. The Gospel actually compels us to endure.

Paul endured suffering from the outside forces of his day. He was threatened. He was beaten, arrested, and imprisoned, but he endured. Paul endured pressure from the inside. There were those even inside the church that sought to shut him up, but he endured. There was theological conflict as well as practical obstacle, but he endured. There was the temptation of sin in his own life and the giving in to sin in the churches to whom he was called, but he endured.

He endured for two reasons. He knew that Christ suffered, and he knew that he was called. Now don't be confused by this phrase that he was completing what was lacking in Christ's affliction. Paul was not referring to any notion that Christ's death was not sufficient. Instead he was insisting that suffering was part of his assignment as one called to the Gentiles. Back in Acts 9, when the story of Paul's conversion is told, we read that the Lord spoke to Ananias—the one to whom God would send Paul—"For this man in my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles, kings, and the sons of Israel. I will certainly show him how much he must suffer for My name." (Acts 9:15-16)

For all of us, we need to understand that carrying the Gospel brings a certain amount of suffering. Listen to what Paul said to Timothy as recorded in 2 Timothy 3:12, "In fact, all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

The Goals (of ministry) signal endurance.

There is a second aspect of this text that calls us to endurance. Notice the goals of ministry.

- Preach the Message of Him to Everyone.

This was unique in Paul's day. This is why he is called the apostle to the Gentiles. The Gospel is open to all.

- Teach Maturity to Everyone.

The key term is "full" or "complete." This sounds like the Great Commission. "Go into all the nations, teaching them to obey everything." The Gospel is for all people to be obedient in all things.

- Present Everyone Mature to Him.

We put the two "alls" together in this last goal.

The sum of these goals is a focus on endurance. We will always have some work to do. The gauge of our ministry must be consistent with the God-given goals of ministry.

The Grace (for ministry) signals endurance.

I am so thankful for this last point. Though I work (labor), I have the strength of the Lord. I get tired. I get frustrated. I want instant results. When there are none (or at least not as noted as I want them to be) I hear again that call to endure and the grace that comes for the endurance.

So What?

Rejoice in Suffering.

Refuse to Settle.

Rely on His Strength.

When I think of endurance, it is hard for me to not think about running—particularly long races like marathons. Have you heard though of Ultra-marathons? In 1983, there was one such ultra-marathon in Australia between Sydney and Melbourne—544 miles. Among the world-class runners was an unlikely 61 year old Cliff Young—a potato farmer. He got into training for the race because of his running and chasing sheep as a boy on a sheep farm, sometimes for 2 or 3 days straight. He ran in boots. He started off slow and behind the pack. Some of the media remarked in the opening that he shuffled more than he ran. But five days later of running or shuffling, Cliff was only one of 6 who finished and actually won. His nearest competitor was a day behind. Cliff ran the 544 miles in 5 days, 15 hours, and 4 minutes. He gave the \$10,000 in prize money to the other 5 who finished. His secret? The other runners ran for 18 hours and then slept 6. Cliff ran through the night only stopping to take bathroom and eating breaks.

Maybe Cliff's story is extreme. We have to sleep. We have to rest. But, hear well the analogy. We cannot quit. We cannot settle until all hear, all respond, and all are ready to be presented "complete" in Christ. That's a view of ministry that keeps it all together.