

*Colossians 1:24-2:5. The apostle Paul was a successful minister who could boast of his elite education, unique conversion, church plants, and other experiences, but he didn't. As he introduced himself to the Colossian church, Paul could've impressed the people with his credentials. Instead, he elevated Christ.*

God often calls the most unlikely people to do His will. If you were one of the Hebrews under Pharaoh, you wouldn't have looked to Moses for help. The man wasn't eloquent and identified with the Egyptians (Ex 2:14, 4:10). Deliverer? No one but God would've called Moses.

What about David? His family had no political ties or prominence when Samuel suddenly visited the town of Bethlehem. The prophet called for David's family, but his father didn't relay the message onto David. After all, he's the baby of the family, a lowly shepherd boy not destined for much (1 Sam 16:1-13). King of Israel? Hardly.

Jonah wasn't a likely candidate to evangelize Nineveh. He hated the Assyrians so much he wanted God to destroy them. Yet, the people listened to Jonah when he visited. They repented and were saved. Rahab, Gideon, and the Twelve Disciples also don't make much sense. The disciples, for instance, weren't educated, well-connected, or even humble team players. God used this unlikely group to establish the church and tell the world about Christ.

Why does God choose unlikely people? Paul said it's "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:29). Great people do great things and then boast of their greatness. When God uses someone like Moses or David, His greatness is apparent. After all, who actually parted the Red Sea? Who defeated Goliath? Who saved Ninevah? Who founded the church? The Bible isn't a book of stories about great men but the story of a great God. And Paul understood this as he introduced himself to the Colossians.

The Church in Colossae had never met Paul (v. 2:2). They knew an apostle wrote this letter, but likely knew little more. Paul didn't talk about himself much. He could've played up his elite education, name-dropped, or told of his accomplishments. He could've filled his letters with stories of his own greatness and travels abroad, but he didn't. He spoke only of God's greatness in Christ.

Who was the apostle Paul? He introduced himself in these verses as a minister. He told the Colossians he's willing to suffer for Christ,

eager to preach Christ, and toils for the people of Christ. It's as he told the Corinthians, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Christ is the theme of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Christ was the heartbeat of Paul's life and ministry. Like a broken record, Paul was a minister stuck on Jesus Christ.

## PAUL'S SUFFERINGS

Paul heard about Jesus while he was a Pharisee. News that Jesus had risen from the dead had started to spread. Word traveled that the Messiah had come, and Paul hated it. He despised Jesus and violently pursued His followers (Acts 8:1; 1 Tim 1:13). It was in this rage that Paul was confronted by the Lord and became a Christian. His hatred became love. He spread the gospel, suffered for Christ even saying, "I rejoice in my sufferings" (v. 24).

*2 Corinthians 11:24-27—"Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."*

*Rejoice in suffering?* No sane person likes pain. Paul didn't like pain, but he did love Christ. He said to the Philippians, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). Nothing else mattered. He had come to love Jesus to the point he would endure anything the world might say or do against him.

Christ had said His disciples would be persecuted (Jn 15:20). Why is that? No one persecuted Jesus and His followers because they did good deeds and helped people. They did many good things, but their message—the gospel—is what angered people. Rejection comes with the territory. Paul understood it, and so did believers in the Book of Acts who when beaten for their faith went out "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer" for Christ (Acts 5:41). Paul wanted the Colossians to know he wasn't a minister-in-name-only. Out of love for God and God's people, he was a minister who would stop at nothing to please Christ.

# A Christ-Centered Minister

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## CHRIST WE PROCLAIM

COLOSSIANS 1:25-29

God had called Paul to be a minister, a kind of steward or manager in the church (v. 1:25). In Paul's case, great suffering came with the job. Ministry wasn't meant to be glamorous or self-exalting. In fact, Paul referred to himself many times as nothing more than Christ's slave (Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10). As for his preaching he said "for what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:5).

If we could ask Paul he would say that a minister isn't an entertainer, philosopher, organizer, motivational speaker, or entrepreneur. He's primarily a shepherd (Acts 20:28-30; 1 Pet 5:2), one who leads God's flock, protects it from danger, cares for its needs, and gives spiritual nourishment. Paul wept over the Corinthians, was astonished by the Galatians, longed to see the Romans, and thanked God for the Philippians. He knew the people in these churches, their needs, and how to minister to them. Love for God and God's people saturates every letter Paul wrote.

*Colossians 1:28—"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ."*

False teachers aren't shepherds who love the flock; they love money, and they love to talk about themselves (2 Pet 2:2-3). Asia Minor had no shortage of men like this. As opposed to men who preached themselves, Paul said to the Colossians that it's "Him we proclaim" (v. 28). *We preach Christ*. Paul did this by warning against error and teaching truth. Warning and teaching; it's what a good shepherd or faithful minister does. Seeing error, he warns against it. Knowing Christ, he teaches about Him. It's what Paul did in this brief letter to the Colossians.

But why bother? Because for Paul the goal of ministry is to "present everyone mature in Christ" (v. 28). Like a farmer cultivating his field for a good harvest, Paul cultivated churches with Christ (John 15:5). He preached Christ, explained the work of Christ, studied the Word of Christ, and sought to please Christ. A ministry devoid of Christ may leave people feeling good, but in the end it won't lead to healthy churches or mature Christians.

## LABORING FOR THE CHURCH

COLOSSIANS 2:1-5

*Colossians 2:1—"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."*

Ministry involves people, and people aren't problems to be managed during business hours only. Ministry is a life calling of sacrifice, not a career move. When Paul looked back on his life, he said to Timothy he had poured himself out as a drink offering (2 Tim 4:6). Ministry wasn't a 40-hour work week with overtime pay. It was a constant sacrifice, a marathon that Paul gladly endured. He says his ministry team shared "not only the gospel of God" with the Thessalonians, but their very "own lives" (1 Thes 2:8). Paul wasn't paid to care for the Colossians; he cared because he loved them. Like the believers in Thessalonica, they were dear to him, always on his heart (v. 1:3).

Love fueled the apostle's ministry (2 Cor 5:14). He hoped this church in Colossae would grow more mature in Christ. He wanted them to be "knit together" as a family, one united in their knowledge of Jesus (v. 2:2). Paul desired these things, longed for them. He loved this church, and he understood what error could do to it.

It helps us to see that error wasn't a matter of theory for Paul. It wasn't food-for-thought or the stuff of philosophical inquiry. Some errors are serious enough to do real harm, or in this case, to destroy a church. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "I say this in order that no one may delude you" (v. 2:4). Though error is often subtle, it's much like adding water. Little by little, error dilutes truth until there's little left.

We don't know much about the errors springing up in Colossae. Whatever they were, Paul told the church to remember that in Christ are "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (v. 2:3). In other words, there's no higher knowledge, no deeper wisdom or special insights, nothing to be found in other religions. All is in Christ, and all you need for life is found in Him.

Paul could've said so much about himself in this introduction, but all we learn is that Paul was a man with a singular passion: Jesus Christ. This is what set him apart from the false teachers throughout Asia Minor. Love for Christ compelled him to suffer, to preach, and to labor hard.