This is for sure a difficult verse. At first read, it almost seems heretical. If Christ's work is sufficient, how can Paul, a fallen human, somehow "fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions?" Yet, here is where we interpret Scripture through Scripture rather than building a doctrine on one verse taken out of context.

The NT is replete with the truth that Christ's afflictions leading up to and on the cross were complete, efficacious, and final. Paul himself wrote an entire letter (Galatians) preaching against the idea that anything can be added to Christ's saving work. We are saved by grace through faith period. There is nothing we can do to add to Christ's redemptive work, as if it is deficient in any way. That said, God, through Paul, cannot now be contradicting himself here. So what in the world does this verse mean?

My understanding of this verse is that Paul's sufferings fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions not by somehow adding to their worth or sufficiency, which is impossible, but by making Christ's perfect, complete, atoning afflictions known to and loved by the world through Paul's suffering. In other words, in some way, Paul's own suffering "for the sake of the church" images, reflects, and extends the sufferings of Christ to the world.

As Christ said to Paul on the Damascus road in Acts 9, when Paul was persecuting the church he was persecuting Christ. Christ is so linked to the church, His body, that when the church suffers the atoning suffering of Christ is extended to the world. We might say the cross is proclaimed through the suffering of the church. Thus, just as Christ approached the cross "as the joy set before Him," so too Paul rejoices in his sufferings because they are for the sake of saving the people of Christ by pointing to His ultimate, redemptive, holy, loving suffering.

As Peter said, admittedly some of Paul's letters are difficult to understand at first blush. But if you dig deep there are unreal riches. What a perspective on suffering for the gospel this one verse is.