

I think the first thing we need to do when we address this text is to give the apostle Paul the benefit of the doubt, and assume he isn't contradicting the orthodox foundation, that he himself contributes to, concerning the completion of Christ's atoning work. In fact, when we look at the text we see internal evidence that this isn't what he is claiming to supply. He claims to be filling up what is lacking in Christ's "afflictions", not Christ's atonement. Now, it could be sympathized with that our natural theological intuitions would be jarred by this due to the atoning work of Christ being wrapped up in His affliction. But our intuitions aren't authoritative, although at times helpful they may be. We read on and see this lack Paul is supplying is for the Church, the body of Christ, those already atoned for. So, what Paul claims to be doing is supplying a lack in the afflictions of Christ that are in no way tied to the atoning work done through those afflictions, and this on behalf of the body of Christ, the church. When this is granted a very helpful question arises: what lack could there be in the afflictions of Christ that Paul could supply to the church without making him a heretic, or cause this text to call into question the theological consistency of scripture? Whatever the lack is it's being filled up in the suffering of Paul, in his flesh. I think it's most orthodox and explanatory to conclude that what's lacking in the afflictions of Christ is a contemporary, personal embodiment of those afflictions. We may, along with the church of Colossia, be told of Christ's love—in his willingness to be afflicted on our behalf—but Paul, along with many other suffering saints, show us that love in its fleshly embodiment. Some might say they don't think anyone could love me like Christ did, and here's Paul saying I do, and I'm a poor example of His perfect love, but an example I am. It may be helpful to see the sufferings of Paul as a message, one he received from Christ and is now imparting to the church, thus filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions would correlate to the fulfilling of Christ's correspondence in the delivering of Christ's message.