

Colossians: The Hope of Glory

Colossians 1:24-29

By [David Felker](#)

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1. Colossians chapter 1 beginning in verse 24. We are in the midst of a series on Paul's letter to the Colossian church and the title of this series is "The Preeminence of Christ." This is our Fall, midweek series, and this is a letter written by the apostle Paul to encourage a relatively young church that was struggling with whether or not the Gospel, as they received it, was enough, and whether or not they needed something else or something more. And Paul throughout this letter is setting up the argument for the Colossians that in Christ they have everything they need. And so we've looked already, even thinking about in verse 17 that Christ is preeminent, He is before all things, in Him all things hold together, He is the head of the body, the church, He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything He might be preeminent. And so let's read Colossians chapter 1 verses 24 to 29 and then we'll pray. Let's read together.

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, 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, 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. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Let me pray for us. Let's pray.

Father, You are good and we pray tonight that we would taste and see that You are good. We know that Your Word is more precious than gold and it's sweeter than honey and we pray that You would enable us to treasure and to taste the sweetness of Your Word and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Defending the Truth: The Authenticity of Paul's Ministry

You have all been asked before at one point or another, "What is your mother's maiden name? What are the last four digits of your social security number? On what street did you grow up?" I think my favorite is, "What was your high school mascot?" And those are annoying sometimes, I'm sorry if I annoyed you or scared you just now, but what are those things? We know what they are. They are security measures to ensure that the person claiming to be you is actually you. And if you've been the victim of identity theft you would gladly answer one more question to save you a lot of stress and a lot of drama. One of the themes of Colossians again is "The Preeminence of Christ," that Jesus is the Lord of heaven and earth and He is sufficient for our salvation. And because of who He is there is a life in Christ. And in this last section of the first chapter of Colossians Paul's credentials as an apostle have come into question. And so some of the false teachers that Kevin talked about last week have probably come and called Paul a fraud, a phony, a fake. And I'm sure that Paul didn't enjoy doing this, but Paul here, and he does this in a number of New Testament passages, shows us the authenticity of his ministry, of his spiritual life.

And so we're going to look at a few things - we're going to look at who Paul is, at what he preached, and of how he preached it. And so we're going to look at Paul - the man, Paul - his message, and then Paul - his method. And as we do that I want you to consider two things. I want you to consider that first, as Paul, even as he is defending his own ministry, who is the focus of this passage. Paul, even as he's defending his own ministry, is focusing on Christ, he's resting on Christ, he's glorifying Christ even as he defends his own ministry. And the other thing that I want you to consider is what if someone called into question you or your faith. How would you respond? Where would you go to find your strength and your shield, your defense? Hopefully as the apostle Paul did, I would turn, you would turn, to the Lord Jesus Christ - who He is, what He has done, and how we desperately need Jesus.

I. Paul: The Man

And so the first thing I want us to think about is Paul - the man. Paul here gives us a little autobiography. In other places he has done something similar. I think if we were going to pick one word that would describe Paul a good word would be "servant." He has said in other places that he is a bond-servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here in verse 25 he says, "of which I became a minister." And you know I think that we can sometimes misunderstand what the word minister means. Minister comes from the same Greek root as "deacon," which means "servant." So Paul is saying, "I'm a minister of the Gospel." And when he's saying that he's saying, "I am a servant of the Lord. I'm a servant of His people. I'm a servant of the church." And he was quick and proud and willing to identify himself as a servant. Is that true of me? Is that true of you?

And you think about the ministry of Christ Himself. Jesus says of His ministry in Mark 10, "The Son of God came not to be served but to serve." His ministry was a ministry of service. Service was at the center of Jesus' ministry. When Paul says in verse 25, "I became a minister according to the stewardship from God," he means that he is God's servant for the church. Remember in the book of Acts there were three times where Paul's conversion story is repeated - chapter 9, chapter 22, chapter 26 - Paul hated Christians, he persecuted Christians, and then God burst onto the scene, rescued Paul, saved Paul. And his ministry was confirmed by the church, it was confirmed by the other apostles in the New Testament, and so he says, "I've been called by God to be a minister - my life, my circumstances." Basically what Paul is saying is he's reinforcing that there's nothing good in him. Everything's come to him from the Lord Jesus. And so Paul was pretty confident in his identity.

Identity rooted in the Lord Jesus Christ

We talk a lot about identity. The idea of identity is huge in our culture. What defines you? Who or what defines you? Sinclair Ferguson said that "Becoming a Christian disenfranchises you from every other potentially defining event of your life." Becoming a Christian disenfranchises you from every other potentially defining event of your life. I think we're prone to look at events that have happened to us and really to interpret our past with a meaning, that our past says something; it makes us who we are. For good or for bad, our past determines who we are. And so maybe your past is your identity or maybe you would say that your past doesn't define you but maybe you would say, "I'm primarily a Mississippian. I am primarily a fan of this particular school. I'm primarily a lawyer," or whatever. Becoming a Christian disenfranchises you from every other potentially defining event of your life. Christ and the Gospel of Christ is the most basic and core identifying factor of who you are. He is the Rock. He is the Mighty Fortress. He is the Anchor of our lives. Paul was confident in his identity. As a Christian, you should wake up in the morning and you should go to bed at night, these should be the things that define you as a Christian - Christ died for my sins according to the Scripture. The hairs on my head are numbered. I am robed [in] righteousness. I am a child of God. I sing to my son, Marshall, "I am Jesus' little lamb." We love that song. What defines you? What is your identity as a Christian? Paul was pretty confident in his identity. His life was in Christ and it was central to who Paul was. And so that's the first thing. Paul - the man.

II. Paul: His Message

Secondly, let's think about Paul's message. Essentially Paul says, "You know me but you also know my message." So what was Paul's message? Look in verse 25. He had this ministry of stewardship from God "that was given to me from you to make the word of God fully known." And so in general terms, broadly

speaking, his message was about the Word of God. Paul's message - his primary service to the church was preaching and teaching the Word of God. He believed that, as the psalmist says, "the Law of the Lord is perfect. On his Law I meditate day and night. It is sweeter than honey; it's more fine than gold." Paul said it's "profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness." His message was centered on the Word of God.

Anachronistic and Out of Place?

I live in Belhaven. I've lived in Belhaven for four years. We live around the corner from Laurel Park. And I've seen this a few times at Laurel Park; I've seen it more at LeFleur's Bluff Park but every so often on a Saturday I will see a group of people - and I had seen this in childhood at different parks as well - but you'll see a group of people dressed in medieval clothes and medieval armor. Billy Dempsey goes out there sometimes. I'm just joking; I'm messing with Billy. There he is! And I've seen this at Laurel Park; it happens more at LeFleur's Bluff Park, but you'll also have, they'll set up flags, there will be, I'm assuming girlfriends and not spouses dressed as damsels, and they will fight. And I remember as a child seeing this happen and thinking as a child, "I need to do this sometime." And the older that I've gotten the more I think, "I don't need to do this. I need to go find someone like Tom Elkin and go do some group counseling with these people!" But there really is a name of these groups. It's called "The Society For Creative Anachronism." And I looked up the word "anachronism" to figure out exactly what that means and here is a definition. It's a person or a thing that is chronologically out of place, especially one from a former age that is inconsistent with the present.

The Word of God: Timeless and Eternal

And I want you to think about this, especially if you grew up in the church, especially if you grew up in a church background. What we are doing tonight seems normal, that we come and we spend a few hours and we open up this Book and we talk about it. The newest parts of this Book are just shy of 2000 years old and we get together and we say that what this Book says calls the shots on things like identity, on things like rest, on things like relationships and gender and world religions. And we bump into people, and will more and more and more - friends, coworkers, neighbors - and they wouldn't use that term but they would think that what we are doing now, this is an anachronism, that it's a person or thing that's chronologically out of place. Paul's message was centered on the Word of God. First Presbyterian Church is a church that's centered on the Word of God. We need to be thankful for our past and we also need to regularly and ongoingly pray for joy, fight for joy, cultivate joy in the Word of God. A prayer to pray for yourself, a prayer to pray for the elders in this church, a prayer to pray for your children is that they would love the Bible, that they would love and that their lives would be centered on the Bible. And so Paul's ministry and hopefully our ministry is about the Word.

Entrusted with the Ministry and the Mystery of God's Word

Specifically Paul's ministry, he was given a very unique privilege. He was given a privilege and he was entrusted with the stewardship of a ministry which has long been a mystery. And he talks about it here - "a mystery which had been hidden in past ages and generations," he says, "and a mystery that is now revealed" - it's made known to the Gentiles. Paul, I think, is contrasting two ideas of mystery. The false teachers that we mentioned had come and had said that there was a mystery, a secret, a secret knowledge, a secret code that was needed to grow, to walk faithfully, and here Paul says, "I have a mystery too but it's not a secret; it's not a secret code. But God has to reveal it and it's something that we couldn't have known unless God revealed it." Here's the summary of this great mystery in verse 27. Paul says, "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." So Christ in you, the hope of glory, is this mystery. And that is Paul's message.

III. Paul: The Method of His Ministry

And so we've looked at Paul - the man, Paul - his message, and then third and last I want to see from this passage the method in which Paul executed his ministry. And so you know it's possible to say the right things and for your life to be so bogus that it contradicts what you say. I remember when I was in seminary and in preaching lab, which you can be in all afternoon and listening to ten different people preach, and I loved getting to listen to guys preach who probably wouldn't be five star recruits in the pulpit but they were godly and they were humble and they had character. And for Paul, the way that he executed his ministry actually reinforced who he was and the message that he preached. And one of the things about Paul's ministry was that it was a ministry of suffering. And you can imagine that the false teachers were actually saying to the Colossian church, you know, "Paul is in prison. Just look at his life. He was beaten. He was whipped. He has been run out of town. Are those really signs of a God-honored and God-blessed ministry? Do you think that God is really with the guy that's in prison and not with us?"

A Ministry of Suffering

And Paul, from the very beginning, this is what God says about his ministry in Acts chapter 9. This is verse 16 - "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." And what Paul is actually, he's saying something like this here, verse 24, he's essentially saying, "The validity of my apostleship is not discounted; it's rather reinforced by my suffering for the church and for Christ." Paul says in verse 24, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of the body, that is

the church.” “So I’m suffering for the Lord and that’s actually reinforcing the fact that I am His and He is mine.”

“Filling up What is Lacking...”?

Okay, there’s this really interesting phrase in verse 24, “In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s affliction.” The preaching schedule for this Fall series was put out at the end of the summer. I’m not naming any names but there was someone that was on this passage, he switched with someone else, that other person came and wanted to switch with me last week and I said “Yes,” I looked at the passage this week and I thought, “That’s why all the switching’s going down! It’s verse 24 right there!” That, “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s affliction for the sake of the body, that is the church.” Of course I’m joking, but here it seems as if Paul is suggesting that there’s something inadequate, that there’s something insufficient about the work of Christ and he seems to be suggesting that he, through his own suffering, needs to supplement something to the cross. Of course we know that that can’t be true. What is Paul talking about? When you look at other parts of the Scriptures you realize that this doesn’t have to do with Christ’s suffering being insufficient. The word “affliction” here is never used in the New Testament to talk about Jesus’ personal suffering or the work of the cross. But Paul came to realize that in some sense his sufferings were Jesus’ sufferings, that when you are persecuted for righteousness sake, when you stand on the side of Jesus because you name the name of Christ, that Jesus considers those afflictions His afflictions.

If you remember when Paul was on the road to Damascus and was converted and Jesus Himself said to him, He said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And you know, Jesus, that seems like an odd question. Paul’s not persecuting you; he’s persecuting Christians. And so what’s Jesus saying? Of course He’s saying that His people’s suffering, that His people’s persecutions, that He is so connected to His people that when they suffer, He suffers. And if that’s the case then this is important for us to get, that our afflictions are not our own, they are also Christ’s. Think about it like this. Jesus is our Advocate. He’s our Shepherd. He’s our sympathetic High Priest. He personally knows our sorrows, our pain, our struggles, our disappointments. He knows when you’re lonely, He knows when your family misunderstands you, He knows when your friends seem like they don’t care. He’s with us in all those times carrying us on to glory. And through Paul’s conversion, this transformation of Paul’s life, he realized that his calling was not to inflict suffering on the church, on the body of Christ, but to endure suffering for the body of Christ.

A Diligent Ministry

And so one other thing to point out, another thing about the way that Paul executed his ministry, it says that he did it diligently. If you look at verse 29 he

says, "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me." That for Paul, that he can do this confidently, he can do this diligently he says. Because why? Because God is powerfully working in him. Paul is struggling with all his energy because God is powerfully working in him. Paul's ministry was impossible. It was impossible. He was called to preach to the Gentiles, he was going to suffer, and he was to work diligently. It's impossible. And I'll bet there are people in here that feel the same way. "You know, school is too much, work is too much, there's so much drama in my life, there's so much baggage - I cannot do this." And the good news is that the work is not yours. If you try to live your life in your own strength out of the reserves of who you are as a person, you will dry up, you will wither, you will die. Are you living in the flesh or are you living in the Spirit? Jesus says in John 15, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." You see, God has got to be the source, the fuel, and the hope of our lives. And Paul is able to work diligently, we are able to work diligently because why? Because it's God who is powerfully at work in us, that God is at work through the trials, through the failures; through your weakness God is at work. Can you see and believe that? Can you say that God is at work?

The Hope of Glory

And so Christ in you, the hope of glory - think about this. That means that one day in Christ you will stand before God and everything that you are and everything that you have done will be laid bare and there will be no place to hide, there will be no place to say, "That's not me. I didn't do that." And Jesus Christ will stand up and say, "I died for her. I laid down my life for him. See My hands. See My feet. See the wounds. He's mine." And the Father will say, "Come, come, enter the joy of the Lord. Come buy wine and milk without money, without cost. Come, well done good and faithful servant." That is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Let me pray for us.

Father, we give You thanks for time together. Thank You, Father, for sending Your Son, Jesus. Thank You, Jesus, for laying down Your life. And thank You, Holy Spirit, for allowing us to see the beauty of the Gospel. Help us as we seek to minister Your Gospel in this place. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.

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