

Colossians: The Incomparable Christ – Exposition of Colossians VII

Colossians 1:24-28

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Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians, chapter one, and verse 24. We have been noting the past several weeks how the Apostle Paul has been setting forth the truth of the sufficiency of Christ; that there is no one and there is nothing outside of Christ that you need in order to have the hope of glory. Paul has been doing this in various ways. In verses thirteen to twenty, we saw him list all sorts of descriptions of who Christ is and, by those descriptions, attempt to convince the Colossians - and of course by extension you and me - that we, in view of what a great Savior we have, ought not to look anywhere else other than Him for the fullness of our redemption.

Last week we noted in verses 21 through 23 that Paul taught us what we were apart from Christ, and what we are in Christ. Apart from Him we are estranged from God; we are enemies of God. In Christ, however, we are reconciled to God, and he went on to teach us what God is making us in Christ. He is making us holy, and blameless and beyond reproach, and finally, he talked about our responsibility to persevere to the end, to continue to walk in the faith which we first received. This week, Paul begins this section by talking about himself, and that may seem a little strange when we have seen the focus being on Christ. You'll understand when we read the passage. Let's attend to the word of the living God -

Colossians 1:24-28

Our Father, this is Your word intended to edify Your people. We are convinced it is a deep word, a profound word, and yet it is a word intended for men and women and boys and girls to be built up in the faith. We pray that by Your Spirit You would edify and instruct us through this word, that You would correct us and challenge us through this word, that You would encourage and strengthen us through this word, and we will give You all the praise and all the glory, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Apostle Paul has been speaking to the Colossians about the sufficiency of Christ. He's been speaking to us about the sufficiency of Christ and he sets forth

Christ in all His glory, and then suddenly he stops to tell the Colossians something about himself, and something about his ministry. But he doesn't do that to take our eyes off of Christ. He does it to help us understand about the completeness of the message they had first heard when the gospel was preached in their midst. Paul wants to tell these Colossians something about his ministry so that they will be confident that the message that they heard is not only part of the truth, but it is the fullness of the truth; that Paul has not secretly kept something back from them that they needed in order to grow in their spiritual lives. And so I would like to point to three great truths - three great principles among many - which Paul sets down in this passage before us.

I. By virtue of our Union with Christ, we share in His sufferings

The first one is this: By virtue of our union with Christ, we share in Christ's sufferings. By virtue of our union with Christ, we share in His sufferings. Paul teaches this truth in verses 24 and 25 and, in particular, you see it in that tantalizing phrase, "filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions." What in the world is Paul talking about, "filling up that which is lacking in Christ's sufferings"? In Christ's afflictions? What is he saying? Paul is asserting in that phrase that he is suffering for the sake of the Colossians and, by extension, for all believers and that he is supplementing Christ's sufferings. But still, what does he mean, "supplementing Christ's sufferings"? What does he mean, "filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions?"

Well, very briefly, let's look at that phrase and break it apart. Let's look at the phrase *lacking*. What is lacking in Christ's afflictions? What does Paul mean when he says that? Well, first of all, he does not mean that Christ's sacrifice was insufficient. He does not mean that Christ's atoning suffering needs to be augmented, needs to be supplemented, and needs to be added to. He doesn't mean that at all. How do I know that he doesn't mean that? Because he spends the first 23 verses of the chapter trying to convince you that Christ's sacrifice is totally sufficient. He didn't forget what he's been saying. The Apostle Paul didn't say one thing for 23 verses and then it just slips his mind when he gets to verse 24. The Apostle Paul is not saying that Christ's sacrifice is insufficient somehow.

Well, then what is he saying? What does he mean when he says that he is "filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions"? Paul means that the sufferings endured by the body of Christ while Christ is at the right hand of God are not done yet, and therefore all believers participate in those sufferings. Jesus was God in the flesh. He had a human body like ours and He suffered on our behalf in His earthly ministry. Christ, our Lord is now at the right hand of power. His human body - physically speaking - is no longer undergoing the curse of sin. His sacrifice is totally sufficient. But we - His body - are still here, in this world where there is affliction and where there is persecution and we as His body still suffer. And so the Apostle Paul says, when he speaks of what is lacking in Christ's affliction, he

is speaking of the sufferings which we endure as the body of Christ while our head, the Lord Jesus Christ, is at the right hand of God. Those sufferings do not add to the treasury of merit. Those sufferings do not bring about atonement for our sins. But, those sufferings are always part of the consequences of sin which Christ will not take away until the day of the final judgement. And the Apostle Paul says, "I'm participating in those sufferings."

Second part of the phrase - what does Paul mean when he says that he is filling up that which is lacking in Christ's sufferings? He's not saying that Christ's sufferings are insufficient and he's having to make up for it. So what is he saying? Well, I'd like you to turn to Acts, chapter 9, because if you'll look at three verses there, I think that you will understand what Paul means. You remember that before Paul was Paul, he was a Pharisee named Saul. He was a Pharisee who hated Christians, who looked down on Gentiles and who even despised Jews who were not zealous for their faith. He was a Pharisee of Pharisees, and Luke tells us in Acts chapter 9, verse 1, that even after the death of Stephen, the martyr, Paul was still breathing out threatenings and murder against the Church of Christ, against the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now if you will glance down a few verses, in verse 4, you will remember that one day this Saul, the Pharisee, was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute some more Christians, and the Lord Jesus Christ met him on the way, and when Christ met him, Christ said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Notice that Jesus did not say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting My disciples?" He said, "Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Now Jesus is not simply saying that because He takes this personally. Jesus is saying this to Saul because when you touch Christ's body, you touch Christ. When you lay your hands over against the people of Christ - His body - you strike at Christ Himself. And so the Apostle Paul, or before when he was Saul, is said to by Christ, "Why are you persecuting Me? As you persecute these, My disciples, you are persecuting Me." You're touching My body. You're attacking My body. You're causing My body to undergo affliction and suffering.

Now, notice again what he said down in verses 15 and 16 of that chapter. You remember a very faithful Christian is told to go find Paul and bring him into his house. Go find Saul and bring him into his house. And that Christian says, 'Now Lord, we've heard reports about Saul. We understand that this man persecutes believers. Are You sure that You want me to bring this man into my house? He will know where I live, and if he knows where I live, perhaps he'll take me and torture me and find out where other Christians live, and take them and torture them.' But the Lord says to this man, in verses 15 and 16, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel, for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake." Paul, when he became Paul, never forgot that encounter. He knew that, though he had been an instrument of persecution of the Christians, that God had made him an instrument of blessings for believers and had appointed him to suffer on behalf of Christ and His disciples. And Paul is telling the Colossians, 'Look, I have been

appointed to suffer for you. I have been appointed to be your apostle. Why would I possibly not tell you some part of the truth that you need to know in order to grow in Christ? I have been appointed to suffer on your behalf. Surely if I'm going to suffer on your behalf, I'm going to tell you the whole of the truth.' Where was Paul writing from when he wrote these words? He was in prison. Paul is saying to them, 'I am suffering on your behalf. I am not atoning for you. Christ has already done that. You're already reconciled. But I am participating in the suffering of the body of Christ.' And Paul doesn't just mean that for himself. Paul intends us to understand that we participate in the suffering of Christ. In Philippians, chapter one, verses 29 and 30, Paul tells us this, "For to you it has been granted, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict that you saw in me and now hear in me." The Apostle Paul is reiterating that because we are united to Christ, because we are His body and He is our head, we join with Him in the fellowship of His sufferings. We participate in the sufferings of Christ. We do not atone by those sufferings, but we share with him in the fellowship of his suffering and our suffering.

Now, there are several things we need to learn from this my friends, and the first one is this: no suffering, no affliction endured by a Christian is meaningless. You remember that from under the altar, the martyrs in the Book of Revelation, chapter 7, cry out to the lord, "How long?" And their death and their affliction is considered precious in His sight. We must never forget that our affliction, our suffering, is precious in the sight of the Lord because our affliction - as those who believe in Christ - is now part of the fellowship of His suffering. Furthermore, we must take care to minister to those who are afflicted and especially those who are persecuted for the sake of Christ. Why? Because when we see a brother or sister in Christ persecuted for the sake of the gospel, under the hand of affliction, we are seeing with our own eyes the sufferings of the body of Christ and we cannot be apathetic about that. We cannot be indifferent about that. We cannot but be concerned to minister to one who is participating in the affliction of Christ.

And another thing that we learn in this passage is that we must prepare to suffer ourselves. Christ warned His disciples that if they treat the Master that way, will they not also treat the disciples likewise? He told His disciples to prepare for suffering. Paul has told us to prepare for suffering. We must expect affliction in our Christian experience. Christ has told us that we will experience it. We must not be surprised. Are we prepared to suffer? One of my jobs as a minister appointed in this church is to prepare you to suffer for Christ. That is an awesome thing because we have lived in a day when it has not cost us much to be Christians. So my friends, I say it solemnly: I expect there to be a day when people in this congregation today will be called in this land to suffer for Christ in ways that we have not had to suffer before. I pledge to you that I want to help prepare you for that day so that you will give a good account of yourself in the day of the Lord. We must seriously prepare to take our stand to witness for Christ and to suffer for His sake if He calls us, because we are united to Him and therefore we share in His sufferings.

II. The gospel plan is an open secret, a revealed truth: made known by God

Notice in verse 26 and 27, a second great truth. The second great truth we find there is the gospel plan is an open secret. It's a revealed truth. It's something that has been made known by God. Paul speaks of the mystery, the mystery that has been hidden from the past ages and generations, a mystery which has been made known among the Gentiles. Paul is contrasting two ideas of mystery. Paul knew that there were some of these new teachers who were at Colosse who were teaching the Colossians that they had a mystery, a secret, a secret knowledge, a secret code that they needed to know if they were going to walk faithfully and grow and have a deeper knowledge of God. The Apostle Paul says, 'Well I have a mystery, too, but it's not a secret code. It's not something that only a few people know about.' Paul is saying, 'this mystery is not mysterious in the sense that only a few of the initiated can understand it.' Paul is saying that, 'this mystery is an open secret.' For Paul, you see, a mystery is not a secret code. It is something that we couldn't have known unless God revealed it. In fact, he gives us a definition of it here in this passage. He says it's something that has been hidden in past ages but which has now been revealed, a mystery is that was once concealed but has now been revealed, and the Apostle Paul says, 'I have been given a stewardship to preach that mystery, that open secret, that revealed truth, to the Gentiles. It's not a secret code, or a secret teaching. It's a proclaimed truth that would not have been known unless God had willed to reveal it.'

And the Apostle Paul says in verse 28 that the goal of his preaching of that mystery is that you and I would be complete in Christ. Again, he's saying to the Colossians, 'If my job is to preach that mystery and my goal is to make sure you are complete in Christ, why would I have held something back that you needed to know in order to be complete in Christ?' That makes no sense.

My friends, today there are many who tempt us to go elsewhere than the word of God to find the true mystery of spiritual life. When we are tempted so, we must respond in remembrance of Paul's word. He has given us everything that we need to be fed and to be built up and to be complete in Christ in His word and by the ministry of His Spirit. We don't need to look at some addition. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we are complete in Christ and He has given us the fullness of the gospel we need in order to walk in Christ.

Let me also remind you in passing that it's a very special thing that the Apostle Paul was appointed to preach this word. Paul, the Jew, the one who hated Gentiles, who hated Christians, who hated those Jews who were not committed to their faith, he is the one who was appointed to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Think of the consequences, my friends, humanly speaking, if it weren't for God's having appointed the Apostle Paul to be the preacher of the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul's the one, the Jew, the hater of Christians who was appointed

to bring us to Christ. It's an enormous blessing to me to think that this man, who would not have wanted to have fellowship with me, this man who would not, in fact, have had fellowship with me, as a Christian or as a Gentile because of his pharisaical belief, he is the one who was appointed to bring me to Christ through the preaching of the gospel. It's a blessed thing, isn't it? God works in such ironic ways that Paul, the Jew of Jews becomes the preacher of grace to the Gentiles. It's something that ought to cause us to praise God.

III. Our hope is in our union with Christ

A third and final thing as we close - I would point to in verse 27: Paul tells us there what the content of that mystery is. He's been given this mystery to preach, this open secret, the thing that God has revealed. What is it? That mystery teaches us that our hope is in union with Christ. Look at Paul's phrase: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Paul is saying, 'the revealed secret that I have been given a commission to preach, is that Christ in you, my Gentile friends, is the hope of glory.' Christ for you, my Gentile friends, is the hope of glory. You who are apart from the promises, apart from the covenant, have no part of the preaching of the prophets or the hearing of the law of Moses. Christ in you is the hope of glory. Christ has been revealed to you.

This is the message that the Apostle Paul has for us. Union with Christ is the only hope of glory. There is no other place where we can go to find our fruition, our satisfaction. People make two mistakes. They either seek the wrong hope or they seek the right hope in the wrong way. The only right hope is the hope of glory which is in Christ. The only way to that hope is through Christ. The Apostle Paul says here, "Christ in you is the hope of glory." The Holy Spirit uniting you to Christ is your hope. Roland Hill once said, "Unless you live in Christ, you are dead to die." Those who come this day who do not know Christ, who have never trusted in Him, who have not repented, who do not walk with Him, who do not love Him, you are dead to die. There is no hope for you. The hopes that you have are vain, they are empty. They are meaningless; they'll never be fulfilled. The apostle makes it clear that we must seek the right hope in the right way. Christ is the hope and Christ is the way.

How do you know that you have truly found that hope? How do you know that you are truly united with Him? He has implanted His love in your heart. That love overflows and you begin to love Him. You begin to love Him more than the world, and that's why Thomas Adams once said, "Let us use the world, but let us enjoy the Lord." Christians find their enjoyment, their satisfaction, in Him and the more a person is satisfied with Christ, the more he will find his satisfaction in satisfying Him. If you find your satisfaction in Him, it is a mark, it is a sign, it is evidence that the Spirit has united you to Christ. He has brought all Christ's benefits to bear for you. If you have never trusted in Him, the only hope you have, Paul says, is 'Christ in you.' The only hope you have is to cast yourself upon the Lord, to go to

Him, to rest in Him, to receive Him as the only way of salvation, to accept Him as God's plan for redeeming you from sin, and to trust in Him and to walk with Him. As we do this, we find that Christ has worked faith and repentance in us because we have been united to Him and our faith and our repentance is only a reflection of the fact that we have been united with Him.

This day, as we come to the table, I would remind all of you, Christians and non-Christians, that this table is about being united with Christ. It is about His worthiness, about the all sufficiency of His sacrifice. For those who are in Christ who feel a lack, this table is for you. For those outside of Christ this table says, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." If you are a sinner and you sense your need, this table reminds you that that need is filled to the overflowing only in Christ. Let us look to Him in prayer:

Our Father, bless us now as we come to Your table and bless Your word and sacrament to our spiritual nourishment. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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