

VI. Christ in You, the Hope of Glory

March 17/18, 2010

Colossians 1:21-29

Aim: To appreciate the greatness and glory of the gospel message.

A. The Gospel Message (Col. 1:21-23)

Paul moves on from considering who Christ is, the splendor of His being and the endless resources of His sovereign mercy, to look instead at what Christ has done for His people. By insisting that the believer should look beyond mere salvation for an experience of ‘fullness,’ the new teachers hinted that what Christ has done for us is only effective up to a point. Paul’s response in these verses is just as relevant to believers today, because the Colossian syndrome has not gone away. It has been repackaged in a variety of ways, but believers are still being enticed with the notion that salvation is only a beginning. We must move on to greater things, we are told. In the end, if all we have is Christ and His salvation, they say, something is missing. In response, Paul makes much of salvation; he emphasizes the greatness of it. Far from being a necessary but relatively minor prelude to a blessing that would surpass it, the salvation of a soul is an experience entirely without parallel.

From God’s general plan to reconcile all things to Himself, Paul turns to the specific reconciliation of believers like the Colossians. Paul’s teaching in these three verses is an application to individuals of the message he has been giving about the person and work of Jesus Christ. He uses the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ eight times in these three verses. That they had been reconciled was evidence enough that Christ was sufficient to reconcile men and women to God. Their reconciliation foreshadowed the ultimate reconciliation of the universe.

Verses 21-23 are one long sentence in the Greek, whose main verb, a form of ‘reconcile,’ comes in v. 22a. Verse 21 identifies the people who receive this reconciling action; v. 22b tells us the purpose of the reconciliation; and v. 23 introduces the condition for the continuing efficacy of the reconciliation.

1. Our Past (1:21)

Paul begins his treatment of salvation by explaining why we need to be saved. He does so by giving a graphic and hard-hitting description of the human condition before regeneration.

a) *Alienated*

‘And you, who once were alienated.’

The idea behind ‘alienated’ (*apallotrioō*) is that of estrangement, being cut off, or separated. It is an unusually powerful word which indicated a persistent and permanent condition. Before their reconciliation, the Colossians were completely estranged from God. Paul would have us understand that the heart of the problem is alienation from God. Non-Christians are detached from God because of sin: there is no such thing as an ‘innocent heathen.’ We enter this world estranged from our Maker. Because there is a breach between mankind and God, we find it difficult to be at peace in any area of our lives.

b) *Enemies*

‘And enemies in your mind by wicked works.’

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They were not only cut off from the spiritual blessings of God, they were actually enemies of God. *Echthros* ('enemies') could also be translated as 'hostile' or 'hateful.' Unbelievers are not only alienated from God by condition, but also hateful of God by attitude (*dianoia*, 'mind'). At the heart of each one of us there is an inbred hostility to God. From the moment we leave the womb we are God-haters. Evil deeds are conceived because we have a strong desire to do something which is wrong. Our actions are shaped by deep-rooted drives and motives that all express this sense of enmity against God. Our problem is not ignorance, but willful love of sin.

The Scriptures present human beings in their natural state as hostile to God because of their involvement in Adam's primal sin (cp. Rom. 1:21). Rather than our evil behavior being the reason why our minds are hostile, it is more natural to think that our evil behavior is the result of the hostility of our minds.

2. Our Present (1:21b-22)

a) *Reconciled*

'Yet now He has reconciled.'

The word translated 'reconciled' here is more intense than the normal Greek term. Paul added a prefix to it, which has the effect of making the term stronger. It speaks of total and utter reconciliation, reconciliation without doubt. The quarrel has been resolved so completely that no question marks remain.

The question arises as to whether man is reconciled to God, or God to man. There is a sense in which both occur. Reconciliation cannot take place until man is transformed (cp. Rom. 8:7-8; 2 Cor. 5:17-18). There is also God's side to reconciliation. From His holy perspective, His just wrath against sin must be appeased. Man and God could never be reconciled unless God's wrath was appeased. The provision for that took place through Christ's sacrifice.

b) *Body of Flesh*

'In the body of His flesh through death.'

Sometimes *sarx* ('flesh') has a clearly negative connotation, referring to the nature of life in the 'old age' (this is clearly its meaning in 2:18, 23, and perhaps in 2:11, 13). In other texts, however, *sarx* refers simply to 'human mortality,' to the physical nature of life here on earth (cp. 1:24; 2:1, 5; 3:22; perhaps in 2:11, 13). This is clearly the sense of the word in this context, but it remains to ask why Paul has introduced the word, since 'body' (*soma*) in itself would have seemed to carry this significance. The simplest explanation is that Paul wants clearly to differentiate his use of 'body' here from the previous occurrence of the word, where it is a metaphor for the church (1:18). Others think that Paul might also be responding to a docetic-like tendency among the false teachers to denigrate the significance of Christ's humanity. But the most likely explanation is that the qualification is added to focus attention on Christ's susceptibility to suffering – a nuance that the addition of the phrase 'through death' explicates.

This direct, almost earthy, language insists that Christ acquired a human body at His incarnation and in that very body died a man's death for the sake of His people. Paul's matter-of-fact insistence on Christ's human flesh and the 'blood of the cross' (v. 20) was probably intended to counter an idea that was beginning to gain ground in the Greek speaking world of the eastern Mediterranean. This was the idea that spirit is good and matter is evil. No true god would stoop to take a body of flesh and blood because, in doing so, its divinity would become tainted. In due

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course, this kind of thinking became one of the main features of a loose group of movements collectively described as ‘Gnosticism.’ Thus, Paul needs to establish that Christ was, and is, both God and man. It would have been quite impossible for a Gnostic to think of Christ as having a body.

c) Holy, Blameless, Above Reproach

‘To present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight.’

God’s ultimate goal in reconciliation is to present His elect holy and pure before Him. The word ‘present’ has echoes of the law courts, as though the defendant is being paraded before the judge in full confidence that the verdict will go in his favor.

Paul chooses three synonymous expressions to give added weight to his message. ‘Holy’ (*hagios*) means to be separated from sin and set apart to God. It has to do with the believer’s relationship with Him. ‘Blameless’ (*amōmous*) means without blemish; reconciliation gives us a blameless character. ‘Beyond reproach’ (*anegklētos*) goes beyond blameless. It means not only that we are without blemish, but also that no one can bring a charge against us (cp. Rom. 8:33). The repetition rams the point home (cp. Eph. 5:25b-27). The most demanding and exacting judge in the universe is completely satisfied with the credentials of those who stand before him. God sees us now as we will be in heaven when we are glorified. He views us clothed with the very righteousness of Jesus Christ. While the Scriptures paint the darkest possibilities for man apart from Christ, they also give us the highest, noblest vision of man known to any religious conception anywhere!

While celebrating the new status that believers enjoy (‘reconciled’), Paul at the same time reminds us that this new status is not an end in itself but has a further goal in view: that we who are already ‘holy’ in status should become ‘holy’ in reality. The future prospect of judgment is one that Paul holds before the Colossians in order to stimulate their continuing growth in the true gospel of God.

‘Fullness’ teaching, in its various forms, is potentially dangerous because it subtly downgrades conversion by suggesting that it is only one of two experiences that we need to go through, and the second of those experiences is the one that makes all the difference. It says, in effect, ‘Yes, it is a good thing to be saved, but salvation by itself will leave you incomplete.’ But what could be greater than the momentous transformation described here? To go from enmity to acceptance, from hostility to friendship, from frosty suspicion on our part and wrath and indignation on God’s part to a completely new footing where mutual love is the keynote, is surely the most enormous change possible. Any converted person has received a blessing of colossal proportions. The new teachers in Colossae had subtly tried not only to diminish Christ but also to chip away at His people’s appreciation of what He had done for them; yet what more can Almighty love do than to turn a congenital rebel into a delighted worshipper and valued companion?

3. Our Future (1:23)

In verse 23, Paul introduces – albeit somewhat obliquely – the central concern of the letter: to encourage the Colossian Christians to resist the blandishments of the false teachers and to continue to grow in their knowledge of Christ.

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a) *Persevere*

‘If indeed you continue in the faith.’

The word ‘if’ does not suggest that there is any doubt in Paul’s mind about the efficacy of the gospel to save people. He is merely emphasizing the need for God’s people to continue in the faith. The litmus test is perseverance. True conversion is a lasting change. It is important that we do not jump to a false conclusion at this point, as though Paul were suggesting that it is actually possible for a genuine Christian to deny the faith completely at some point after conversion. The Bible repeatedly testifies that those who are truly reconciled will continue in the faith (cp. Luke 8:13; Jn. 8:31; 1 Jn. 2:19). In Romans 8:29-30 we find him teaching that nothing is more secure than a person who has experienced the love of God. Paul’s logic is that no one whom God has foreknown, predestined, called, and justified will not also be glorified (cp. 1 Pe. 1:4-5).

Paul could be paraphrase here as: ‘At any rate if you stand firm in the faith – and I am sure you will.’ The positive application of Paul’s words is this: the gospel does not work like magic. The mind, the heart, and the will must be involved. Our minds must feed on Christ and His Word. Our hearts are to focus on Him in love. Our wills are to take their practice and pattern from Him. Present faith leads to present results.

At the same time, those who are being kept by God recognize that they have a duty to persevere, and that is what Paul has in mind here. Perseverance is the hallmark of the true saint. While no true Christian is ever lost, there are some unhappy souls who give the impression of having come to faith in Christ, but with the passage of time this impression proves to be ill-founded. Paul urged steadfastness upon his friends so that there would be no doubt that God was keeping them by His grace.

Paul wants to confront the Colossians with the reality that their eventual salvation depends on their remaining faithful to Christ and to the true gospel. Only by continuing in their faith can they hope to find a favorable verdict from God on the day of judgment. We have in this verse, then, a real warning. This warning, along with many similar ones, presents the ‘human responsibility’ side in the biblical portrayal of final salvation. God does, indeed, by His grace and through His Spirit, work to preserve His people so that they will be vindicated in the judgment; but, at the same time, God’s people are responsible to persevere in their faith if they expect to see that vindication.

b) *Abide*

‘Grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away.’

We are to continue in the faith that unites us to Him. We are to remain grounded and settled in this glorious Christ. Both of these positive descriptions of continuance in faith have their background in the world of building. The Greek verb behind ‘established’ or ‘grounded’ (*themelioō*) refers to ‘laying the foundation’ of a building (cp. Mt. 7:25). ‘Firm’ or ‘steadfast’ (*hedraios*) is not so clearly intended to connote the idea of a building, but it can have that meaning.

This same idea is also stated in the negative (cp. 1 Cor. 15:58). We are not to ‘move away’ (*metakineō*) from Him. There is to be no slippage. Christians must not lose their moorings like a boat that has drifted away from a safe anchorage. For the Colossians this would mean being attracted to something less than the gospel they had embraced at the outset.

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c) Hope

‘From the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heave, of which I, Paul, became a minister.’

Paul urges the Colossians to focus on the hope that comes through response to the gospel in distinction from the false hope being held out by the false teachers. Paralleling an earlier passage, Paul qualifies this gospel in three ways: it has been heard by the Colossians (cp. v. 6); it has universal significance (cp. v. 6); and it has been proclaimed by an individual servant (cp. vv. 7-8). Although it is obvious that the gospel in Paul’s day had not been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, Paul’s meaning is that the gospel had been proclaimed throughout the whole creation.

Ours is a gospel that engenders confidence. The Colossians needed to recover their sense of certainty and conviction. They are to hold fast to the apostolic gospel that they had heard.

This is why Paul emphasized that the gospel that they had heard was the same gospel that had been the means of transforming others in other places too. The Colossians had not heard a defective gospel, something less than the full gospel, because in responding to Epaphras’ message they had responded to the very same gospel that Paul preached. The imperative, then, was not to move on to something new and different, but to remain fixed on the ground that they had occupied since first coming to Christ.

B. The Gospel Minister (Col. 1:24-29)

Paul outlined something of the character of his own service to God and, in effect, invited a comparison. Who resembled the apostle most – the newcomers, with all their showmanship, or Epaphras, who had first preached the gospel to them?

Paul often spoke of his ministry when he needed to establish his authority and credibility. That was his aim in this passage. Colossians was written in part as a polemic against false teachers, and it was essential for Paul to defend his authority to speak for God. Having begun the epistle with a statement of his apostolic authority (1:1), Paul now gives a detailed look at the divine character of his minister.

Paul’s reference to himself as a ‘servant’ of the gospel at the end of verse 23 leads into this section, which focuses on the ministry of Paul. The personal focus of the section is seen in the dominance of the first-person singular. The sequence of topics in this portion of Colossians bears a general similarity to the sequence found in Ephesians 2:11-3:13, but with some differences. The focus on the inclusion of the Gentiles that we find in Ephesians is almost entirely missing from Colossians. This suggests that Paul has contextualized some basic themes in his preaching for two different situations; and that one difference in the situations is that inclusion of Gentiles is not a significant issue in Colossae.

1. Paul’s Suffering (1:24)

‘I now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church.’

a) Rejoice in Sufferings (1:24a)

‘Sufferings’ refers to Paul’s present imprisonment (Acts 28:16, 30), from which he wrote Colossians. Paul did not found the church at Colossae, nor had he visited the church (2:1; cp.

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1:8). Yet in some manner the suffering that Paul undergoes in his gospel ministry has benefits for the Colossians.

Paul rejoices because his suffering brought good to the Church. By referring to the church as Christ's body, Paul highlights the corporate solidarity that Christ's people enjoy with Him. The Colossians, of course, are members of this worldwide assembly of believers, so they are among the beneficiaries of Paul's sufferings. Without his willingness to suffer (see 2 Cor. 11:23-29), there would have been no church in Asia. The gospel has always spread through missionary hardship. But there is something more here, and it is far more subtle: believers grow through their personal suffering, and the good they receive flows to others – thus edifying the Church.

b) *Fill Up in My Flesh (1:24b)*

This is one of the most difficult passages in the letter, and indeed one of the most debated verses in all of Scripture!

'Fill up' is a rare double compound Greek verb, made up of two prepositions (*anti* and *ana*) plus the verb *plēroō* ('fill,' fulfill'). A simpler form of this verb, *anaplēroō*, occurs elsewhere in Paul with the sense 'fill up [completely]' (note esp. 1 Cor. 16:17 and Phil. 2:30). But the problem is to determine what nuance the addition of the preposition *anti* gives to this verbal idea. There are five main possibilities. 1) The verb could mean 'fill up in place of' – Paul suffers in place of the church. 2) It could mean 'fill up on behalf of,' simply emphasizing the later preposition 'on behalf of.' 3) It could mean 'fill up in response to' – Paul's sufferings respond to what is lacking. 4) The *anti* could have a reciprocal significance – Paul in his turn (after Christ), suffers for the sake of the church. 5) Granted the tendency of *koinē* Greek to use compound verbs, it could indicate simply what its simple form means: 'fill up.' Perhaps the third option makes the most sense.

(1) What Paul Does Not Mean

We can be clear that this is not a reference to the redemptive sufferings of Christ. Paul is not suggesting that the redemptive suffering of Christ requires any supplementation. There is no suggestion here that Christ has not suffered enough to pay the full penalty for our sins, or that it is incumbent on us to add some sufferings of our own until the full price is paid. (This is the thinking that lies behind the Roman Catholic teaching of purgatory.) Paul is convinced that Christ's death on the cross is completely and finally capable of taking care of the human sin problem. The whole of Colossians as well as the rest of the New Testament teaches the sufficiency of Christ in atonement (cp. 2:13, 14; 1:12-14, 19-22). Paul did not help with atonement; that was Christ's solo work. This view is actually highly insulting to our Savior and to all that He achieved by suffering in the place of His people.

Roman Catholics have imagined here a reference to the sufferings of Christians in purgatory. Christ's suffering, they maintain, was not enough to purge us completely from our sins. Christians must make up what was lacking in Christ's suffering on their behalf by their own suffering after death. That can hardly be Paul's point, however. He has just finished demonstrating that Christ alone is sufficient to reconcile us to God (1:20-23). The New Testament is clear that Christ's sufferings need nothing added to them. Besides, *thlipsis* ('afflictions') is used nowhere in the New Testament to speak of Christ's sufferings (*pathēma*).

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(2) What Paul Does Mean

There are likely two levels of meaning here. To begin with, the apostle's phrase has echoes of an expression in common use among Jewish scholars at that time, the 'woes of the Messiah' or 'tribulations of the Messiah' (cp. 1 Enoch 47:14; Baruch 30:2). It was widely supposed that the coming of the Messiah would be preceded by a time of intense trial. Jesus and the New Testament authors used similar language to describe the 'last days,' initiated with Christ's first coming and awaiting their fulfillment with the glorious return of Christ (cp. Mt. 24:21). The early Christian consciousness, surely shared by Paul, that Christ's coming had inaugurated the 'last days,' is an important backdrop to what Paul is saying here.

In this view, we should think of 'the afflictions of Christ' not so much as afflictions that He suffered, but as afflictions that would come upon the church prior to His return. What is lacking then, needing to be 'filled up,' are the tribulations that are inevitable and necessary as God's kingdom faces the opposition of 'the dominion of darkness' (v. 13). Thus the sufferings are the sufferings of God's people, but they are ultimately Christ's sufferings because of His identity with His people.

Paul could rejoice because his imprisonment, and for that matter his many other trials, mean that he was 'filling up' in his flesh, or receiving in his body, sufferings that would otherwise come the way of believers in Colossae and elsewhere. 'In my flesh' refers to Paul's physical pain. The physical pain that Paul endured at the hands of Christ-hating persecutors was the result of what he did to benefit and build the church. In addition, his sufferings were bringing the total nearer the ultimate goal and hastening the day of the Kingdom.

A second possibility that deserves to be considered is connected with the organic unity that exists between Christ and His people. There is a close identification that develops between Christ and the Church through suffering. The servants of God suffer because they have an organic connection with their Master. They are so closely identified with Him that the enemy tries to inflict damage on Christ by harming His people (cp. Acts 9:16). Jesus, having ascended to heaven, was out of the reach of His enemies. But because his enemies had not filled up all the injuries they wanted to inflict on Him, they turned their hatred on those who preached the gospel. It was in that sense that Paul filled up what was lacking in Christ's afflictions. In this case, Paul's rejoicing, though the suffering itself was far from pleasant, arose from the fact that it was a guarantee that Paul's ministry was authentic. He bore in his body the marks of the blows intended for Christ (cp. Gal. 6:17; 2 Cor. 11:23-28).

These sufferings have no redemptive benefit to the church, but they are the inevitable accompaniment of Paul's 'commission' to proclaim the end-time revelation of God's mystery (vv. 25-27). In this way, Paul's sufferings are 'on behalf of' the church, including the Colossian Christians. And of course, as a prisoner for the gospel, Paul is suffering for them even as he writes. As members of the fellowship of those raised with Christ and forming therefore part of Christ's body, we also are the beneficiaries of Paul's suffering.

However this phrase is to be understood, one thing is clear: Paul knew his sufferings were good for the Church and that they brought to him a special closeness with Christ.

How did the new teachers in Colossae compare in this regard? Certainly when Paul measured himself against his rivals in Corinth he challenged them to prove their genuineness by asking whether they had suffered to the same extent that he had (2 Cor. 11:23).

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How are we to understand the principle that Paul lays down with respect to the world of evangelical churches in the West today? Few of us have suffered in any marked way for the cause of Christ. Perhaps the critical test is that the one who has been proved faithful in small things will stand much sterner tests, should they come along.

2. Paul's Ministry (1:25)

'Of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God.'

a) Minister

Paul described himself as a minister of the gospel (v. 23) and a minister of the church (v. 25). The word 'minister' (*diakonos*) means 'servant.' Paul reminds the Colossians that he is their servant, that is, their slave. God has commissioned him to do this work; the source of his ministry was God. His service had two aspects. He is to serve both the Word of God and the people of God. These two go together; they are inextricably linked. The true spiritual leader will serve God's people best by teaching them the Word of God.

All Christians have been called to serve God in one capacity or another. As God is sovereign in calling men to salvation, so is He in calling them to service.

b) Steward

'Stewardship' translates *oikonomia*, a compound word made up from *oikos* ('house'), and *nemō* ('manage'). It means to manage a household as a steward of someone else's possessions. A 'steward' is someone with a commission from a superior, someone who has been required to discharge a trust. Essentially a steward looks after the property of another. The steward had oversight of the other servants and handled the business and financial affairs of the household. That freed the owner to travel and pursue other interests. Being a steward was thus a position of great trust and responsibility in the ancient world.

In this case, the apostle had been entrusted with the gospel. He exercised his stewardship faithfully (cp. 1 Cor. 4:1-2) when that message was conveyed to others. In his service to the churches, he is not required to do what they say, nor to make it his main aim to please them. He has been commissioned by God to present to the people 'the word of God in its fullness.'

Paul's charge has preaching as its main function, and specifically Biblical exposition. The idea behind 'fulfill the word of God' is to lay out the Word of God fully. People cannot know Christ better without knowing the Scriptures. Expository preaching was the heart of God's call to Paul. Preaching must open the Word of God. Paul affirms here such preaching is primary to an authentic ministry.

The word 'fulfill' (*plērōsai*) actually translates the same Greek verb that Paul used when he spoke of filling up in his flesh 'the afflictions of Christ' (v. 24). It means that he was to carry out his commission fully and completely. God's word is not 'filled' when it is preached only, but when its preaching accomplishes the purpose God has for it: when it is heard and produces growth and fruit in the lives of those who respond (cp. vv. 5-6).

The church is the household of God (1 Tim. 3:15), and all believers have the responsibility to manage the ministries the Lord has given them. Contrary to much popular teaching today, our spiritual gifts are not intended for our own edification. They are given to help us minister to others.

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3. Paul's Mystery (1:26-27)

a) *Hidden and Revealed (1:26)*

'The mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints'.

In using the word 'mystery' (*mystērion*), Paul was giving a distinctly Christian meaning to a term that was part of the jargon that was probably employed by the new teachers. Half of the twenty Pauline occurrences of this word are found in Colossians and Ephesians. It was certainly in common use in the wider religious scene around the eastern Mediterranean during the first century. Pagans used the word 'mystery' to describe the secret information that was only available to an exclusive group of people. It usually conveyed the idea of initiation into a special secret. For that reason, it smacked of elitism.

No doubt the new teachers in Colossae were shrewd enough to put a Christian veneer on this mentality. They would employ Christian terminology to convince those who took their emphasis on board that they were being admitted to the 'inner ring,' the special circle of devotees who had experienced a level of blessedness that the normal Christian could not expect.

By contrast, Paul had something quite different in mind. He used 'mystery' in the same way that we use the word 'revelation.' A glorious message of truth that was once hidden has now been revealed. Paul uses the word characteristically to denote truth about God and His plan of salvation that had remained hidden in the past but that has now been revealed. Paul's use of this word is not to indicate a secrete teaching, rite, or ceremony revealed to only some elite initiates (as in the mystery religions), but truth revealed to all believers in the New Testament. It has 'now' been revealed; that is, at the time of the writing of the New Testament.

This message was revealed to the 'saints' or 'holy ones.' This term does not refer to especially distinguished Christians, but to all the people of God. In Colossae it was being suggested that there was a privileged inner circle who had received revelations denied to others. Paul's emphasis, however, is that the gospel, once unknown to mankind at large, has now been revealed to all believers, whoever and wherever they are. The 'mystery' was that God's saving purpose was going to be extended to the Gentiles (cp. Is. 49:6; Rom. 15:9-12). This is even more explicit in Ephesians 3:4-6, where it is made clear that the gospel is as much for Gentiles as for Jews.

b) *Christ in You, The Hope of Glory (1:27)*

'To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.'

In the past, only the Jews had caught a glimpse of the gospel blessings, but now God had chosen to 'make known' His glorious riches, even to the Gentiles. Mysteries are not discovered by the genius of man, but are revealed by the will and act of God. It is God's purposes that His people know this truth.

What is the 'mystery'? It is that Christ is the hope of glory for both the Jew and the Gentile (cp. Eph. 3:3-6). Paul applies the 'mystery' specifically to the inclusion of Gentiles within the new covenant people of God. This is the first (and only) place in the letter where the word 'Gentile' (*ethnos*; plural *ethnē*) occurs. This motif of inclusion of the Gentiles is far less prominent in Colossians than it is in Ephesians. The Old Testament predicted the coming of the Messiah. But the idea that He would actually live in His redeemed church, made up mostly of Gentiles, was not revealed.

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That Christ indwells all believers is the source for their ‘hope of glory’ and is the subject or theme of the gospel ministry. Paul’s focus here is on how God’s new covenant people are completely identified with their representative Christ, and how that new identity gives hope for the future. Paul here returns to a key theme in this opening chapter (cp. 1:5, 23) in order to remind us again that hope is tied to Christ, and to Christ alone. What makes the gospel attractive is not just that it promises present joy and help, but that it promises eternal honor, blessing and glory.

‘Glory’ (*doxēs*) translates a Greek word that includes the idea of intense brightness with that of crushing weight. Here ‘glory’ is combined with the idea of ‘riches,’ in particular with extreme wealth. The heart of this glorious message is Christ Himself (cp. v. 28). The Christian leader is not merely to expound Scripture; he is to preach Christ. At heart then, the difference between Paul and the new teachers in Colossae was that he preached Christ, while their preaching mentioned Christ but subtly undermined Him. The apostle held up before people a majestic Savior in all His fullness, with all His glorious perfections on display. This was not the diminished, shriveled, pygmy Jesus of much contemporary preaching.

Moreover, we cannot preach Christ without preaching the Scriptures. The gospel is about a Christ who can be experienced and known, who takes up residence within the believer and who is not only glorious in Himself, but brings with Him the ‘hope,’ – that is to say, the confident certainty – of glory for all who are united to Him.

4. Paul’s Service (1:28-29)

a) Preaching (1:28)

‘Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.’

The best way we can serve the people of God is to do as Paul did and explain his message to them. ‘Preach’ or ‘proclaim’ (*katangellō*) means to publicly declare a completed truth or happening. This will involve a negative thrust (‘warning’) and a positive thrust (‘teaching’). These twin tasks are outlined by Paul in his farewell address to the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:20-21.

‘Admonishing’ or ‘warning’ is from *noutheteō*. It speaks of encouraging counsel in view of sin and coming punishment. It focuses on the preacher’s warning of Christians who might be tempted to stray. ‘Teaching’ (*didaskō*), on the other hand, refers to imparting positive truth. ‘Wisdom’ (*sophia*) refers to practical discernment – understanding the biblical principles for holy conduct. As people need wisdom to know how to live out true knowledge of God, so the preacher needs wisdom to know how to teach and admonish people. The consistent pattern of Paul’s ministry was to link teaching and admonishment and bring them together in the context of the general doctrinal truths of the Word. Doctrinal teaching was invariably followed by practical admonitions.

The verse is remarkable for its emphasis on universality: the Greek word *pas* occurs four times. Particularly striking is the threefold repetition of ‘every person’ (*panta anthrōpon*). The repeated phrase, ‘every man,’ tells us that Paul was concerned at the elitist tendencies of the new teaching in Colossae. He countered the intellectual exclusiveness of the Gnostic teachers by emphasizing that no one was to be excluded. All without exception were to be warned, every individual in particular was to be taught. There is a universal aspect to the gospel. Paul is not saying that

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everyone will be saved, but that this good news is for everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul proclaimed Christ and admonished and taught everyone because he truly believed Christ was for everyone.

The goal of the ministry is the maturity of the saints. ‘Present’ (from *paristēmi*) probably has an eschatological focus, referring to the presentation of every believer before God at the final judgment. To be ‘complete,’ ‘perfect,’ or ‘mature’ (*teleion*) is to be like Christ. *Teleios* connotes the quality of being so wholehearted in one’s devotion to the Lord that one can be said to be blameless in conduct. Although all Christians strive for that lofty end, no one on earth has arrived there yet (cp. Phil. 3:12). Every believer, however, will one day attain to it (cp. 1 Jn. 3:2).

b) Laboring (1:29)

‘To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.’

The Greek word translated ‘labor’ (*kopiaō*) means working to the point of exhaustion; it was as if the person had taken a beating. ‘Striving’ translates a word (*agōnizomai*) taken from the world of athletics. It describes the wholehearted commitment of the sportsman who gives his all. Our verb ‘agonize’ is taken from the same Greek word. The words together describe the tremendous energy of Paul’s apostolic ministry. He strained every physical and moral sinew to present every man complete in Christ (cp. 1 Th. 2:9).

And yet Paul is clear that all his toil and hard labor would have been useless apart from God’s power in his life. ‘Energy’ or ‘working’ and ‘works’ come from the same Greek root (*energeia/energeō*). As he has done earlier in verse 11 with reference to the Colossians’ life of Christian obedience, Paul again stacks up words referring to power. And the ultimate aim is much the same: to balance human effort with the enabling grace of God in Christ. All of Paul’s work would be of little effect if it was not done through the power of Christ.

There is a clear link here between our working and ‘His working.’ The way for us to experience God’s power is not to employ some mystic technique, but to attempt something for God and find in the doing of it that He gives the power that we need.

Paul could see that his friend and colleague Epaphras had suffered because the newcomers in Colossae had promoted themselves in a way that belittled him. Paul made it clear that he stood with Epaphras. In doing so he demonstrated that he had a very high view of his calling. This is apparent in his view of himself. He was the servant of God’s people and a servant of God, a steward entrusted with something precious beyond words, a message that he had to transmit faithfully and completely. His commission required him to serve not just an elite handful, but all the people of God, and to do so to the point of exhaustion.

For next time: Read Colossians 2:1-7.