

“Christ Above All”

²⁴ 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, ²⁵ 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, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Who are your heroes? Who are the people that have helped shape your life? Ben McFather, Chris Vinson, and Josh Lake are people you have never heard of, but they have profoundly shaped my life. In a similar way the Apostle Paul's example was essential to the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles. Occasionally in his letters, Paul talks about his calling to ministry. When he does, it might be easy for us to feel a bit uncomfortable with how big his claims are. However, we must not see Paul's meaning outside of his intended context. Like we will see in our text this morning, Paul is using himself as an example so that the churches will see Jesus more clearly. The priority of his life is simple: make Christ known. In whatever circumstance, Paul wanted to proclaim Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Lord and Savior. This is the theme of Colossians 1:24-28. Paul proclaimed that Christ is above all.

As we think about these verses this morning I want us to see that if we are going to grow spiritually or know the Lord it will be when we see Christ as above all things.

In verse 24, Paul says that he rejoices in his sufferings because they are for the sake of the Colossians. I believe we can extend his meaning beyond the Colossian Church to the rest of the churches among the Gentiles. His words are definitely applicable to other places. Paul's sufferings were important for the churches. The question is how and why are his sufferings important.

Paul is suffering for the sake of the gospel. He is suffering because of his faithful testimony to the message of Jesus as the Christ of God. Paul may be referring to his imprisonment in Rome. On the other hand, he may be referring to all of the suffering that he has faced on his missionary journeys and trials. Either way, Paul's various sufferings were not the result of foolishness or sin. He was beaten and jailed. He was shipwrecked and faced hunger. He was rejected by people of his own race. All of this

happened because he preached a message of grace from God through Jesus. From the Apostle Paul's perspective his suffering was not his own. He did not suffer for himself either. His sufferings were Christ's sufferings. His sufferings were for the church that Christ died for.

Look again at verse 24. The text says, "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." In his commentary on Colossians, John Calvin says that the word often translated "and" should be translated "for" in this case. The sense the conjunction takes is that Paul is rejoicing in his sufferings because/for his sufferings are Christ's own sufferings. He is suffering for the church on Christ's behalf. The confusing thing in this verse is that the phrase the "sufferings of Christ" is not used in its normal sense. Usually we think of the sufferings of Christ in their connection with Jesus' death on the cross to provide salvation for his people. We know that Paul is not thinking about the sufferings of Christ as it pertains to salvation because in verses 20-22 Paul talks about Christ's work as complete. Christ has reconciled "to himself all things, whether in heaven or on earth, making peace by the blood of the cross (v. 20)." "He has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless (v.22)." The work of Christ in salvation is done. It is finished.

Hebrews 10: 12 says it this way, "But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God."

In Colossians 1:24, Paul is connecting his personal suffering for the gospel with the work of Christ in spreading the gospel to the nations. There are two doctrines that will help us in understanding what Paul is saying. First, there is the doctrine of union with Christ. The NT mentions this idea in many different ways. "Created in Christ" (Eph 2:10) "Crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:20) "Raised with Christ" (Rom 6:8); I could go on, but that is enough to show you how important the idea of union with Christ is. In Colossians 1:18, Paul says that the church is the body of Christ. It should not bother us then that Paul says that he is suffering on the church's behalf for Christ. Paul sees himself as being united with Christ. He has been made a minister of the gospel by Christ. His ministry, which he will explain in the next verses, is for the church. Part of what Paul does is live out the gospel. Jesus said that if the world hated him (Jesus), then the world would hate his disciples. Paul is a living testimony to the power and shame of the cross. His life was completely transformed by Jesus, but it also meant that he had to take up his own cross.

Another important doctrine for understanding Paul's point in verse 24 is the doctrine of vocation. Vocation is an old word for work. To put it more precisely it speaks about one's calling or chosen profession. Martin Luther spoke a lot about vocation. In his day, people thought that religious professions were the only way to serve God. On the other hand, Luther said that whatever one's vocation is the person has a higher calling of doing all things unto the Lord. In other words, when Paul

says that he is filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, he is saying that he has been called to serve the church by suffering for it.

Now we have established that Paul is suffering for the church on Christ's behalf, but how does this help the church? We know that it does help the church because in Phil 1:12 Paul says this:

"I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel." In that context, he goes on to say that more people are preaching the gospel and more people are hearing the gospel because of his imprisonment. That is certainly cause for rejoicing. The church too is being strengthened by Paul's steadfast faith. There is much to lament when someone falls away from the faith, but when we find people living faithful Christian lives there is some strength that we receive from that testimony. It is even more so when we meet people who have suffered for Christ and still refuse to reject him.

In Paul's case, suffering is not the only thing that he is doing. He is not a mere passive recipient of persecution. He has received from God a calling to make the "word of God fully known" (v. 25). We do not have to wonder at the relationship between his suffering and his preaching. They form the foundation of his ministry. As he suffers for Christ, his message gains a wider audience. The church, having received courage from the message and suffering of Paul, preaches the gospel too. Paul's main ministry then is to make the word of God fully known.

What do you think it would take to make the word of God fully known? It seems like an impossible task. There are so many things in the Bible. How could one person ever expect to explain all of it? Well, it is an impossible task if you take "word of God" to mean the sixty-six books of the OT and NT. Even in Paul's day, a person could devote their career to studying the OT. These biblical scholars had a lifetime's worth of work just on one part of the OT. The Scriptures, being from God, are deep. I think if we see the reference to the word of God as the Bible we are being too broad in our interpretation. In verse 26, Paul says that the thing that he is making known to the world has been hidden for "ages and generations," but that now it has been revealed to "his saints." The message that Paul is tasked with proclaiming to the world is not the entirety of the Bible. Though I think we can safely say that he had to explain a lot of the Bible to do his task well. Rather, the task that God had entrusted to Paul is this: to make known to the Gentiles that salvation is in Christ Jesus.

I think we can again get into some confusion about what Paul is trying to say here. Verse 27 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." What is the most important part of the message that was hidden and is now revealed? Is it that the Gentiles are included? Or is it that the gospel is about being united to Christ? There could be a case for either interpretation in this particular verse, but when we look at the larger context I think we have to say that Paul is talking about our Lord Jesus.

We can see this clearly in verse 28. Paul says, “Him we proclaim...” Again in Colossians 2:1-2, “For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ.”

The Apostle Paul emphasized the person and work of our Savior, Jesus. He sought to make Christ known by clearly teaching who Jesus was and what he accomplished in his death and resurrection. You can see this throughout the letters of Paul in the NT, but we have already seen this in Colossians 1. We should not find it very difficult to understand why Paul thinks this is so important. The eternal Son is the creator and redeemer. He is the king into whose kingdom we are being transferred. He is the hope we have in life and death.

These statements by Paul about his calling into ministry, the role of suffering, and the message he is preaching are important. They are important because they set up his authority to speak about the issues that the Colossian church is facing, but they also should encourage his readers to look to Jesus. He is their “hope of glory.” He is their peace with God. He is their creator. He is their king.

Now Paul established his credentials as a minister of God for the revelation of the gospel especially to the Gentiles in verse 24-27. Starting in verse 28, Paul gives the reason he is writing this letter. We are going to stop at verse 28 today, but it serves as a good summary of what is to come. Verse 28 says,

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

What is Paul proclaiming? He is proclaiming that the eternal Son is the creator of all things and the long awaited redeemer of Israel and the world. He makes things right between sinners and his holy Father. He guides us and sanctifies us by his Spirit. We abide in Christ and he in us. The Spirit produces in us the fruit of faith, hope, and love.

In verse 28, Paul says that the proclamation of Christ includes two things. First, it includes warning people. In the context of the letter to the Colossians, Paul wants to warn people about the dangers of false teaching. False teaching leads Christians away from Christ and to arguments about all kinds of things. It is safe to extend the warning everyone in verse 28 to unbelievers as well. The NT has several warnings about coming judgment. We should not be too shy about sharing those warnings when we have the opportunity.

The second thing that accompanies the proclamation of Christ is teaching. Jesus himself gives his disciples the command to teach everything that he taught. Part of what it means to proclaim Christ is to tell people about him, but also to show in plain teaching what it means. I think this particularly

applies to teaching the Bible. Telling people about the many ways that Christ has changed your life is great. It makes the message of the gospel very personal. However, we must be able to show from Scripture where we are getting our beliefs about God.

Proclaiming Christ includes warning and teaching, but it is to be done with “all wisdom.” There are ways to proclaim, warn, and teach that do nothing but distract from the message. Paul’s ministry and the ministry of the church are to be characterized by wisdom. Biblically speaking, wisdom is rooted in the fear of God. The fear of God is knowing who God is and honoring him rightly. Submitting to him and obeying his commands. Loving and worshiping him. The fear of God extends beyond religious observance. For example, when someone hurts you, the natural response is to retaliate. Biblical wisdom says to let God, who judges with perfect righteousness, take vengeance. Another example is work and money. Work and money are important, but wisdom is about knowing how to properly value work and money. Is money so important that you should do anything to get it? What lies at the heart of over-working? The Bible speaks to these things from God’s perspective. Likewise, we need wisdom to know how to proclaim Christ.

The goal of the proclamation is not simply to make Christ known, which is why wisdom is so important. It is true that we do not have to fret about how people will respond to the gospel. The work of salvation belongs to God and not to us. We do not save people. However, in our Christians lives we are responsible for warning and teaching people about Christ. The goal of that warning and teaching is not to judge or condemn. Again that is God’s work. We are longing for spiritual maturity in our lives and in the church. Do you know God? Do you walk with God? Do you worship God? Does the church minister the gospel to you and the other people in the church? Does the church practice true religion (James 1:27)? Is the church being faithful to the Scriptures and your confession of faith?

One more thing on spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is primarily about walking in the Spirit, so spiritual maturity does not look like normal human maturity. Age and length of time do not automatically equal maturity. Spiritual maturity is about walking with the Spirit long enough to manifest the fruit of that close relationship. You should expect spiritually mature people to know doctrine and desire to be faithful to Scripture. Likewise spiritually mature people will be people full of love, peace, patience, and gentleness. The spiritually mature person should be self-controlled. A domineering spirit does not mark out the mature person. I am telling you all these things because you are in the process of finding a new pastor, and there will likely be new leaders chosen from among the church members. Don’t choose leaders that seem impressive, but instead choose leaders that display spiritual maturity.

Conclusions:

Paul's main goal in his ministry was to make the crucified and risen Savior known to the world. It did not matter to him if he suffered for the gospel because he knew that his suffering would make the gospel message clearer to God's people. He did not compromise on his message, but gave clear witness to Jesus as the eternal Son of God who came into the world to reconcile God and man. His goal in doing this was clear: when the gospel message was fully proclaimed the people of God would hear it and receive it. As they received the Word of God as revealed to them they would grow up into spiritual maturity. Their faith would be established and their lives would be changed. They would value the things of God rather than the things of this world. All of the religious priorities of their former lives would shift to giving glory to the Triune God. Their religious practice would switch to hearing the Word of God, singing, prayer, and partaking in the ordinances of the church. They would see their lives as living sacrifices. The Apostle Paul's goal is clear. I think we can say that our Lord Jesus' goal was the same for his disciples in the gospels. If spiritual maturity is the goal for NT era disciples then I think we can assume that for our day as well.

The challenge that we have is finding a way to make Christ's supremacy applicable to our everyday lives. What does it mean that Christ is above everything in this world? How does Christ being above all change anything in your life?

While it may be difficult to see on the outside of someone's life, we can see how much of a difference Christ makes in our inner life. Seeing Christ's supremacy over all things should change the way we see the world. For example, knowing that Christ rules all things means that injustice and unfairness will not make us bitter. Everything and everyone will have to submit to the Lord in the end so hurts done to us will stir up in us a longing for Christ to return. Another example would be, being part of Christ's body means that all the suffering we encounter as Christians is really Christ's suffering. We are part of Christ's body. We are part of him as he suffers and he suffers with us. If we are rejected by our own people, they are really rejecting Christ. He also knows how we feel because he was rejected by his own people. Whether we are triumphant or rejected, Christ is our aim. We do not want to please the people around us. We copy our Lord and seek to live like he did: loving our neighbors and seeking to do the Lord's will.