

The Supremacy of Christ: Joining Jesus in Saving Sinners

Colossians 1:24-29

February 8, 2015

Dan Hoffman

~Rejoice in your opportunity to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sacrifice as a steward of God's mystery~

[Pray]

Please open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1. If you are new with us this morning, at Fort George we believe that God speaks to His people through the Bible. And so every week we open up a section of Scripture to see what He has said in the past, and what He is speaking today. And over the last few weeks we have begun a journey through Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Now Colossae was a small city in Asia, east of Rome, in what is modern day Turkey. It was a diverse place with lots of people coming together from all sorts of different backgrounds and religions. And in the middle of this city was a church, a local gathering of believers, who were struggling to live out their faith in the midst of a world that believed there were many paths to salvation, and that truth was relative – a world not so different from our own.

And it is into this world that the Apostle Paul writes. And throughout his letter while Paul addresses several issues the central thought he wants to prove is that Jesus Christ holds the supremacy over all creation and over all religious truth and therefore His gospel is the only hope for human salvation. This really came to a head last week, and if you missed that sermon I would encourage you to check it out on our website – fortgeorgebaptist.ca – as everything in the rest of Paul's letter builds off of the worship song we looked at in those verses.

...

Alright, today we are zeroing in on the end of chapter 1 – verses 24 to 29. And in this section we come across a very strange bit of text that needs unpacking. In verse 24 Paul says:

[Read Colossians 1:24]

Paul says that through suffering, he is filling up or completing something that Christ started but didn't finish with His own sufferings. That means there is something that Christ's sufferings didn't do that Paul, and now all Christians are called to complete.

What could that possibly be? What could we possibly do that Jesus hasn't done already?

The good news is that we don't have to guess at what Paul is getting on about here. While these words might be surprising at first, with some careful reading

we can dig out what Paul wanted the Colossians to understand, and through them, what we are to take away from this today.

And actually what we get in these words is an incredibly empowering and challenging charge from the apostle to the Church of all time. Paul is going to tell us how he rejoiced at his invitation to join Jesus in saving sinners, and how this same charge is passed to us. So Paul would say to each of us who bears Jesus' name: **Rejoice in your opportunity to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sacrifice as stewards of God's mystery.**

...

Now to get at this we need to unpack Paul's sentence structure. This might not sound super exciting, but it is going to enable us to get at the truth behind these complicated words.

You see Paul was a very intelligent and intentional writer. The words he chose and the places he used those words was always very carefully crafted. And verses 24 to 29 is a great example of this poetic precision.

In the Greek these six verses are all one sentence – just look at how long that is. Now this isn't bad grammar in Greek, but we don't like those kinds of sentences in English – we call them run on sentences – and so the NIV breaks this section into five parts. And so you can see the periods that they have used to do that after just about every verse. But really this is all one sentence – and as such it is one complex thought. And it is only when it is all held together that we can make sense of it.

So let me paint you a picture of what this sentence looks like in the Greek.

At the beginning of the sentence, in verse 24, Paul starts by talking about rejoicing in suffering. This is an interesting depiction as it ties something positive – rejoicing – together with something generally perceived as negative – suffering. And then down in verse 29 at the end, Paul gives us something parallel. He talks about strenuously contending with all the energy Christ powerfully works in him. So again there is a need for endurance as Paul labours, but this is tied to something really positive as his effort is done in the power of Christ.

Moving towards the center of our text we continue to see this parallel language used. So in the bottom half of verse 24 Paul talks about filling up in his flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of Christ's body – that's the really complicated part of this sentence. And then in the bottom half of verse 28 he talks about working to present everyone mature in Christ. So both these sentences are about laboring to build up the church. Hold onto that because that's going to be key.

Continuing to move towards the center, in verse 25 Paul talks about his commission to present the word of God in fullness. God called Paul to preach

and teach His gospel to the world. And then in the first half of verse 28 he talks about Jesus being the one He is proclaiming, and he does this by admonishing and teaching everyone in all wisdom. So in both places Paul is preaching and teaching.

And finally at the very center of this section of text, in verses 26 and 27, we get the content of what Paul is teaching – the mystery of the gospel. That means it is the mystery of the gospel that makes up the main point of what this text is talking about.

And this kind of pattern with parallel ideas moving in towards a central thought is called a chiasm. And in English we don't often write this intentionally, but this was really common among first century professional writers. And Paul actually makes use of this a lot.

And the benefit it gives us here is that the difficult words of verse 24 have a parallel in verse 28. And we can use this parallel to understand what Paul is saying.

So what I would like to do is start with the center of the chiasm, in verses 26 and 27, because this is the main point that Paul wants to bring out. And then we will work our way outward ending with the difficult passage in verse 24. And as we do this we will unpack the big idea of this text, that Paul wants us to **rejoice in our opportunity to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sacrifice as stewards of God's mystery.**

So look with me at verse 26 where Paul defines what the word of God in its fullness is.

[Read Colossians 1:26-27]

When it comes to the fullness of the word of God, Paul says it has to do with the mystery of Christ in us. And this is what he wants us to rejoice in and even suffer to pass on: **Rejoice in your opportunity to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sacrifice as stewards of God's mystery.**

Now "mystery" is actually one of Paul's favorite theological ideas.¹ And here he says God's mystery had been kept hidden for ages but was now disclosed to the Lord's people.

And by using the word "mystery" in this way Paul is actually making a reference to something he knows God has loved to do from the beginning, and that is to reveal things that He's hidden. We see this throughout the Old Testament, but particularly in apocalyptic texts like the book of Daniel. In Daniel chapter 2 King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that no one could interpret.

¹ See Ephesians 1:9 and 3:1-9 for example.

And Nebuchadnezzar was going to kill all the wise men in Babylon for their failure until God revealed both the dream and the meaning to the prophet Daniel. And when Daniel went to the king this is what he said:

“No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the **mystery** he has asked about, but there is a God in heaven who reveals **mysteries**. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. (Daniel 2:27-28)

Mysteries then are things God has hidden until the time He ordains they should be revealed. And His chief mystery is how Christ can live in us. And Paul says this great truth, hidden from understanding since the beginning, had now been revealed.

So throughout the Old Testament people proved their sinfulness and desperate need for a saviour, but nobody ever imagined that God would put on skin and become that Saviour. But when Jesus finally came onto the scene God revealed that this had been the plan all along.

This is why on the road to Emmaus Jesus was able to prove He was God’s Messiah using the Old Testament. There we read:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself. (Luke 24:27)

Ever wish you had been there for that conversation?

And using this lens early Christians saw that from the time humanity first fell God had been setting a plan in place to restore what had been lost. The third son born to Adam and Eve was Seth – which means seed. And the whole story of the Old Testament follows this seed through Noah and then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then we hear about it in the voice of the prophets and eventually watch it in the royal line of King David. And then this seed comes to maturity in the person of Jesus Christ, the Saviour the whole world needs.

And in our text today Paul says the fullness of this mystery has now been revealed and it is Christ in us. God’s Messiah isn’t just a political character from the first century; He is God Himself come to live inside those who trust in His name. This is the hope of glory!

...

Alright, let’s now take a step out from the center to look at what it means for us to be stewards of God’s mystery. Look at verses 25 and then the first half of 28.

[Read Colossians 1:25]

[Read Colossians 1:28a]

Here Paul wants to affirm that he is fulfilling a commission God gave him to spread the word – he’s God’s servant. And the word “servant” here is the Greek word *diakonos* from which we get the word deacon.

Now this isn’t a glamorous title, it really does mean servant. So read janitor or housekeeper in God’s kingdom. And while *diakonos* was used as a title to distinguish official servants in the church, it also refers to all Christians. Being a servant is what it means to follow Jesus.

This is why when Jesus’ disciples were wondering what kind of glory being His right hand men was going to land them, Jesus set them in their place saying:
 “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:42-45)

And this is how Paul saw himself and all Christians, as servants of Jesus charged with a specific job. And that job is what he describes in verse 25 and 28 where he talks about his commission to offer God’s hope of glory to the nations. You see, while Jesus’ death made salvation for humanity possible, it only accomplishes its purpose when people put their faith in it. And to do that people need to hear about it. That’s why Paul said:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:14)

So preaching Christ wasn’t just Paul’s job. In reality every person who has Christ in them has this job. Every person who is called to Christ is called for this purpose. We are commissioned to pass on what Christ has given us.

...

So let’s keep moving outwards in our text. Here is where we get to the tricky section in Paul’s sentence in verse 24 and 28 and 29.

[Read Colossians 1:24]

So “How do Christians fill up something that is lacking in Christ’s afflictions?”

The key to understanding this phrase comes in the parallel passage in verses 28 and 29. So there we read:

[Read Colossians 1:28-29]

Paul strenuously labored, by Christ's power, in order to present people fully mature in Christ – to present them as Christians. His job was to introduce people to Jesus by teaching them God's mystery.

And that is the context we need to understand what Paul is saying in verse 24. So when Paul refers to his own sufferings that fill up what is lacking in Christ's he isn't adding anything to the worth of Christ's sufferings, but rather he is extending Christ's sufferings to the people they were meant to bless. And he does this by preaching Christ's message to them through his suffering.

Now Paul isn't calling us to become saviours with Jesus – that would be impossible and heretical – but he is challenging us to join Jesus in saving sinners by presenting Jesus' sufferings to the people we have been placed next to.

Friends, Christ's afflictions don't lack any power to save. They didn't lack any power 2000 years ago, and they don't lack any today. What they do lack is that they are not known. They are still a mystery hidden from most people and therefore their power to save has not been realized.

But God wants people to receive His gift of salvation, God wants to reveal His mystery to people all around the globe and all over Prince George. And He wants to use you to do that.

So this verse then is a parallel to Jesus' words to His disciples when He said:
 Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12)

Now obviously it is impossible to conceive of doing more spectacular miracles than Jesus did – right? Even if we walked on water or came back from the dead Jesus has already been there, done that. So the greater things He is talking about here are not greater in power or purpose, but greater in number.

As Jesus fills His followers we are empowered to carry His presence and the power of His cross into the whole world. Jesus' ministry was restricted to Palestine, but now the scope of ministry of those who believe in Jesus is greater in that it has literally gone to the ends of the earth.

But look now at the beginning of verse 24. Paul says it is our personal suffering that fills up Christ's afflictions. This is tricky, but there is again a parallel in another of Paul's letters we can use to bring clarity.

In Philippians Paul talks about Epaphroditus, a man the Philippians had sent to aid Paul while he was in prison. But on his way Epaphroditus got sick and almost died. And now Paul commends him back to the Philippians telling them that Epaphroditus' willingness to suffer *made up for* the help the Philippians had wanted to give Paul but not been able to do. Paul says:

So then, welcome him [Epaphroditus] in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. (Philippians 2:29-30)

Epaphroditus risked his life to make up or fulfill the help the Philippians couldn't give Paul themselves. So what was it that the Philippians couldn't give?

Commentator Marvin Vincent says:

What was lacking... [in the Philippians gift] was the church's presentation of this offering in person. This was impossible... [because Paul was in prison and the whole church couldn't come to him. But they had sent] Epaphroditus... [to fill] this lack by his affectionate and zealous ministry.²

And by his willingness to suffer to the point of death Epaphroditus had successfully carried the concern of the Philippian church to Paul. And this is what is going on in Colossians 1:24. Now Paul, through his suffering on Christ's behalf, was presenting Christ's sacrifice to the world.

You see Jesus' message of salvation is not broadly that He died for the world, but that He died for you. And as such Christ's offer doesn't extend to people as impersonal news presented in a paper or on Prime Time. Instead everyone who receives it must meet Jesus face to face. And this happens when people see the sacrifice of Jesus lived out in the people His Spirit resides in. When Christians embrace suffering the world sees Jesus.

...

Now this absolutely flies in the face of a culture that values comfort and the quality of life as its highest virtue.

For any who missed it, last Friday the Supreme Court of Canada voted unanimously to make physician assisted suicide a viable option for Canadians who would rather die than suffer. Canadians hate pain of all kinds!

Now of course the suffering Canadians are so eager to avoid is pain they made no choice to experience – either debilitating disease or disability.

So can you imagine how radical it will look when Christians across our provinces and territories choose not to look like normal Canadians and instead embrace suffering – not of pain we have no choice in, but pain we could avoid – as we joyfully take up our crosses to present the power of Christ's suffering to the world?

² Vincent, Marvin. "Epistle to the Philippians and to Philemon" (ICC), p. 78)

Canadians will be absolutely blown away by this kind of action. And the people in Paul's day were just as impressed. When they saw Paul choose to suffer for the name of Christ they saw Jesus shining through him.

...

Now verse 24 starts with the words "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you." And so we need to affirm that when Christians suffer to expand the influence of Christ's gospel we don't do it whining and complaining, we actually do it in joy!

And we do this because while the road to the cross is always a road full of pain it is not a joyless one, in fact there is abundant happiness in obediently following Jesus. In contrast to the world's pleasures which are fleeting and temporary, when we walk where Jesus calls us we find lasting and perfect happiness. The happiest people on earth are those who know the mystery of Christ living within them, they revel in the hope of glory, and they love extending it to those around them. So Paul says: **Rejoice in your opportunity to fill up what is lacking in Christ's sacrifice as stewards of God's mystery.**

...

I want to close with a story of someone who embraced personal suffering to present Christ's cross to those they loved.

The account is of a man named Joseph who was invited to sit down with Billy Graham after one of his conferences. Joseph was an unlikely candidate for this as he was a Masai Warrior from a small tribe in Kenya, but his testimony won him this honour. Michael Card recounts the story:³

One day Joseph, who was walking down a hot and dusty African road, met someone who shared the gospel of Jesus Christ with him. Immediately he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior and the power of the Spirit began transforming his life. He was filled with such excitement and joy that the first thing he wanted to do was tell the people in his own village about the Good News he had received.

Joseph hurried home and began going door-to-door, telling everyone he met about the cross – that's the suffering – of Jesus and the salvation it offered. He fully expected to see their faces light up the way his had. But to his amazement the villagers not only didn't care, but they became violent.

The men of the village seized him and held him to the ground while the women beat him with strands of barbed wire. He was dragged from the village and left to die alone in the bush.

³ Story adapted from Michael Card, "Wounded in the House of Friends," *Virtue*, March/April, 1991, pp. 28–29, 69. As presented by John Piper
<http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/called-to-suffer-and-rejoice-to-finish-the-aim-of-christs-afflictions>

Somehow he managed to crawl to a water hole, and there, after days of passing in and out of consciousness, he found the strength to get up. He wondered about the hostile reception his friends and family had given him and decided he must have presented something about the story of Jesus incorrectly. So he rehearsed the message he had heard and returned to his village to give it again.

Joseph limped into the circle of huts and began proclaiming “Jesus died for you, so that you might find forgiveness and come to know the living God.” But once again he was grabbed, beaten, and dragged unconscious from the village to die.

To have survived the first beating was remarkable, but to live through the second was a miracle. Again days later, Joseph awoke in the wilderness, bruised, scarred – and again he determined to go back.

This time as he approached the village the men ran and attacked him before he even had the chance to open his mouth. As they flogged him for the third time he spoke to them of Jesus Christ and His suffering on their behalf. Before he passed out, the last thing he saw was the women who were beating him beginning to weep.

This time he awoke in his own bed. The ones who had so severely beaten him were now trying to save his life and nurse him back to health. The entire village had come to Christ as Joseph had filled up what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions by bringing the message of Jesus’ cross to them through the blood spilled from his own body.

Can you imagine the joy Joseph felt upon recovering this third time?

...

So brothers and sisters, prepare yourselves to suffer in order to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. Jesus has chosen you to bring His message of salvation to the people in Prince George. No doubt it will cost something. But there is great reward in being a servant of Jesus. So **Rejoice in your opportunity to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s sacrifice as stewards of God’s mystery.**