

“The Glorious Mystery & Its Implications”
Colossians 1:24-29
July 4, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service
Pastor Nicoletti

We continue, this morning, in our series on Paul’s letter to the Colossians, as we come to Colossians 1:24-29.

Please listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

Paul writes to the Colossian church:

^{1:24} 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. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

We praise you, Lord,
and we ask you to teach us your ways and your truth.
Help us to take your Word into our hearts and onto our lips.
Make us to delight in your testimony more than in riches.
Help us to meditate on your precepts,
and to fix our eyes on your ways,
Grant us to delight in your truth,
and to never forget your Word.
In Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.
[Based on Psalm 119:12-16]

Introduction

The first three words of our passage should cause us to pause, and to consider the context of this letter.

Paul begins with the words: Now I rejoice.

And we can take that for granted. Without thinking much, we can chalk it up to Paul being in a good mood, or being a more optimistic kind of person, or being extra spiritual in a vague sort of way, or maybe just being in an encouraging set of circumstances.

So we need to pause and remember Paul's situation here. Paul, at the time of writing, is in prison. He says so later on, in chapter four. [4:3]

Why then, would he rejoice? And why, would he rejoice, as he goes on to say "in [his] sufferings"? He doesn't just say that he rejoices in the midst of his sufferings, or despite his sufferings – but that he rejoices "in" his sufferings. [Wright, TNTC, 92]

On its face, that seems absurd. And if it's not absurd, we should want to understand it – we should want to grasp how it could be, and how we might follow Paul, to also be people who could rejoice even in the difficulties and suffering of life. So ... why does Paul rejoice in his sufferings?

To answer that question Paul goes on to explain one glorious mystery, and three implications of that glorious mystery.

And that's what we'll consider this morning.

The Glorious Mystery

So, the primary, and the core thing Paul describes – the foundation of everything else, is what he calls in verse twenty-six a "mystery" and in verse twenty-seven "the riches of the glory of this mystery."

As we consider that, we should start by recognizing what Paul even means by that word. Paul is not using the word "mystery" here to describe something that is "merely puzzling or paradoxical" as we often use the English word "mystery." Instead, he is referring to something kept secret and now revealed. And for Paul, that secret is not a set of facts or a timetable for the future, so much as it is a person. [Wright, TNTC, 95] And more specifically, its their relationship to a person.

Paul writes in verse twenty-seven that at the heart of what he is describing is "the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you."

Paul points us to the reality that the church, as a Body, is united to Christ, its head, *and* that each individual believer has Christ dwelling in him or her through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This truth of the union between Christ and his people is central to the Christian faith, and Paul says here that it is the great mystery that has been revealed in the gospel. What the gospel reveals is that we will not be saved by our own efforts, or by an abstract decree of God, but we will be saved by a person – and specifically by our relationship to that person. When we cry out to Jesus – when we trust in him from the heart – then Christ, in his mercy, unites himself to us by his Holy Spirit. We have a mystical union with Christ which is the basis of our entire Christian life.

That is why the Bible, over and over again, states that all believers are in Christ and that they also have Christ in them. And it is this relationship that Paul points to here.

John Murray writes: “Of all the kinds of union or unity that exist for creatures the union of believers with Christ is the highest. The greatest mystery of being is the mystery of the trinity – three persons in one God. The great mystery of godliness is the mystery of the incarnation, that the Son of God became man and was manifest in the flesh. But the greatest mystery of creaturely relations is the union of the people of God with Christ.” [Murray, 169]

If you are a Christian, then no relationship you have, no matter how close, compares with your union with Christ. Even if you don’t feel particularly close to him, still, if you have called on him and placed your trust in him, then you are in him and he is in you, and your union with him is higher than your union with anyone else.

And if you are not a Christian, then the relationship Christ is calling you to, as he calls you this morning, to turn to him, and place your faith in him – that relationship is higher and more profound than any other relationship in your life could be right now.

Such a high and profound relationship is at the heart of our text. And such a profound relationship will have profound implications. Paul, in this passage, gives us three in particular. Here we see that our union with Christ means that we are also united to Christ in his gospel hope, his gospel mission, and his gospel suffering.

Implication #1: The Hope

So first, we see that because we are united to Christ, we are also united to his gospel hope.

And we see that in verse twenty-seven. Paul writes that the mystery in view is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul here speaks of their union with Christ as synonymous with their hope of glory. Why is that?

Well, as Robert Letham puts it: “Union with Christ is right at the center of the Christian doctrine of salvation. The whole of our relationship with God can be summed up in such terms.” [Letham, 1; see also Murray, 170] Which means that the fullness of our hope and glory in the gospel is found in our union with Christ.

Our union with Christ is not just one step in our salvation. It is the full summary of our salvation – from beginning to end. [Murray, 165] Our hope in this life and the next is not found in a principle, or a transactional exchange with God (where we give him faith and he gives us grace) – but it is found in our union with Christ. It is through our union with him that he takes our sin. It is through our union with him that we receive all his blessings. And it is through our union with him that one day we will be raised as he was raised, glorified as he was glorified, and enjoy fellowship with God for all eternity, as he enjoys fellowship with God for all eternity.

Christ lived the life we should have lived, and that blesses us because of our union with him. He died the death we should have died, and that paid our debt because of our union with him. And as we shared in his death through that union, so we will share in his resurrection through that

union. The fullness of our hope and glory and salvation in the gospel comes through our union with Christ, received by faith and accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit.

One thing that means is that if you have not really trusted in Christ – if you do not have a living relationship with him – then you cannot receive the salvation he has to offer. Even if you are so close. Even if you are here today, or if you grew up here. You need to personally be united to Christ by faith. As one writer puts it, it doesn't matter how close your house is to the electric lines if your house is not actually connected to them. Without that connection, it will do you no good. And in the same way, unless you are united with Christ by faith, all that he has achieved is of no help to you. [Anthony N.S. Lane, quoted in Letham, 7]

But another thing that means is that if you are in Christ, and if he is in you, then you share in all his blessings. All the blessings of the gospel he has to offer are yours. And you should not fear any judgment, because united to Christ you share in his favor with God now, and for all eternity. Your union with him is the hope of glory in your life.

So the first implication we see is that if we are united to Christ, we are also united to his gospel hope.

Implication #2: The Mission

The second implication of our union with Christ that we see in this passage is that we are united to Christ in his gospel mission. And we see that in verses twenty-eight and twenty-nine.

Paul writes: “Him [that is Jesus Christ – Him] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

Now, one thing we need to recognize is that Paul here is presenting this not as a separate thing we do for Jesus, but as something Jesus does through us, because of our union with him. If you remember from last Sunday, just a few verses earlier, in verse twenty-two, Paul said that it was Jesus who was working to present the Colossian Christians before himself as “holy, blameless and above reproach.” And now, here in verse twenty-eight, he says that he – that Paul – is working to present them mature in Christ. Christ and Paul are working towards the same goal. And *how* are they working towards the same goal? In verse twenty-nine Paul says, “For this I toil, struggling with all *his* energy that *he* powerfully works within me.”

For Paul, his gospel mission cannot be disconnected from union with Christ, because it flows from his union with Christ. Christ's goal is to present his people holy and blameless before himself. Paul is united to Christ, and so his goal is also to present people holy and blameless before Christ. Christ has provided all that is needed for his mission in the world, and because Paul is united to Christ, Paul is neither adding to Christ's power, nor is he just taking it easy, assuming that because Christ is at work, things should be easy for him. No – Paul is toiling, but even as he toils, he knows it is Christ's energy working through him in the gospel mission.

A commentator writes: “Paul does not go about his work half-heartedly, hoping vaguely that grace will fill in the gaps which he is too lazy to work at himself. Nor, however, does he imagine

that it is ‘all up to him’, so that unless he burns himself out with restless, anxious toil nothing will be achieved. He knows that God’s desire is to bring Christians to maturity, *and* that God has called him to have a share in that work. He can therefore work hard without the stressful motivation of either pride or fear. He thus becomes an example of that maturity, both human and Christian, that he seeks under God to produce in others.” [Wright, TNTC, 97]

Paul is an example to us here. And he shows us that like him, because we are united to Christ, we must also be united to Christ in his gospel mission – receiving both our goals and our power from Christ.

Now, it’s nice to talk about mission abstractly. Everyone gets on board with that. We like that. Actually doing it is another thing.

I remember in seminary, church planters would come to the seminary to talk about urban church planting. And they would have these ministry lunches for students to come and hear a presentation about urban church planting. The idea was for the planter to present the work they were doing and ask students to consider if the Lord was calling them to that kind of work as well.

And those ministry lunches would be packed. I remember being in some where all the seats in the lecture hall were taken – there was standing room only.

And so, when the assistant pastor of our church in St. Louis was starting a church plant in downtown St. Louis, we assumed there’d be a ton of interest among students in joining him. This wasn’t just a talk – it was an actual concrete opportunity to do the missional work of urban church planting. And our pastor publicized at the seminary that he was looking for seminary interns to serve in a real-life urban church plant.

Well ... the response did not fill any rooms. It was tepid at best. I think we eventually attracted one other guy.

We like to think about the missional work of the Church. We like to be inspired by the missional work of the Church. We don’t necessarily like to *do* the missional work of the Church. But if we are united to Christ, then that is what we are called to.

So, practically, speaking, how do we bridge that gap? How do we get ourselves involved?

It might be helpful to think of the Christian mission in your life on three different levels. You might think of the unique places God has called you to his mission as an individual. You might think of the ways God has called you to be involved with the mission of his church locally. And you might think of the ways God has called you to be involved with the mission of his Church globally.

In different seasons God may call you to focus more on one of these areas and the other, but more often than not you are called to have some involvement in each. So let’s consider each one.

First, there are the ways God has called you to live out the mission of the gospel in your unique circumstances. This is how to be a faithful presence, or a gospel witness, or the loving hands and feet of Christ in the lives of Christians and non-Christians that he has placed in your life

specifically – family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, other acquaintances. Every relationship you have is a place of mission – of being part of God’s work of making, maintaining, or maturing disciples for Jesus Christ. So that is the first place to think about this aspect of mission.

But from there, God has called you to be a part of the mission of his church locally. God has placed you in Tacoma (or in the Tacoma area). He has put you here, in this congregation. Our church has a call to local missions. Our church – our congregation, Faith Presbyterian Church – is called to be a local, concrete, manifestation of the Body of Christ to people in Tacoma and Pierce County. And you, as a part of this congregation, are called to be involved with that in some way. It might be a big way. It might be a small way. And each of our stages of life will shape what is possible for us. But before you let yourself off the hook, you need to honestly consider how God may be calling you to be a part of that work.

As a congregation, some of that work is done through ministries we run. Better English on 6th or the upcoming Vacation Bible School program, or Sunday School, or the ministries of Women’s Ministry of Faith are just a few examples of that. Other ways we serve is by partnering with other local Christians. Our work with Tacoma Rescue Mission, or Progress House, or CareNet, or NRB are just a few examples of that. But each of these ministries are examples of formal, institutional ways, that we can serve the local mission to both Christians and non-Christians, as the Body of Christ here in Tacoma – the mission of making, maintaining, and maturing disciples for Jesus Christ.

Other opportunities are less formal and more organic. They may be ways that you serve our congregation either in outreach or work within the congregation. Maybe you are actively inviting people to church. Maybe you are ministering to people or groups in need within our congregation.

So there are lots of ways to do this.

Here's the thing though. When it comes to opportunities to serve in the mission of the Body of Christ locally, we can sometimes be like those seminary students I described. We like to think about it. We like to hear the stories about it. We’re glad it’s there. We may even pipe in with some advice about how people should do it. But we often don’t join in ourselves.

Do you have that tendency?

If you do, then you’re not really living out this aspect of your union with Christ. And you need to. Because it is what you are called to do if you are united to him.

And the first step is usually just doing something. It means that if you have a heart for some sort of organic ministry that you do on your own, then you stop thinking about it, and you just do something. It doesn’t have to be grand. It just has to be something – some way that you are living out your union with Christ in his gospel mission.

Other times it means setting aside some sort of idea we have for organic or independent ministry, and plugging into an existing ministry or structure. Sometimes, when we are having trouble doing what we know we need to do, that is the sort of help we need.

I was reminded recently of my own need for outside direction to get out of my own head and actually just do the things I needed to do. Though my recent reminder was not in the context of ministry.

I know this may be hard to believe when you look at me ... but healthy diet and exercise are not things that have ever come to me naturally. I'm just not good at it.

Over the years, when I would realize again that I really should lose some weight, I'd typically go on a research binge. I would read articles, and watch documentaries, and read books on the best way to lose weight and get in shape. And then, when I settled on some grand plan I had devised, I'd map it all out, schedule the whole thing ... and then I'd follow it for about a week before it all fell apart.

In early 2020 I was at an all-time high for my weight, and I knew I needed to do something ... but I also knew my track record. And I don't even remember what led to this, but I decided this time I was going to approach it differently. I didn't start researching. I didn't come up with a grand plan. I just picked a program I had heard some good things about, and I signed up. And I downloaded the app. And it told me what to do. It told me how much I could eat each day, and I obeyed it. I did what I was told. I stopped trying to outsmart things myself, and I trusted the program put together by others, and I followed what they told me to do. And it took. It worked better than anything had for me in over a decade.

I think a lot of us need to approach our service in the Kingdom of God that way. It is great when we have a good idea. It is great when God blesses someone with entrepreneurial gifts. But we sometimes replace actual service in the mission with armchair reflections or dreams about service. And we need to stop doing that.

Some of you here simply need to pick a ministry, and sign up for some prescribed role where you will show up, and someone else will tell you what to do to serve the Kingdom of God for that particular hour, in that specific time and place.

You can email Jonathan about Better English on 6th, and if it goes forward, they will tell you how to do it, and when to show up, and what to do, and you can serve our neighbors struggling with our language, showing them the love of Christ, and pointing them to the gospel of Christ.

You can sign up with Melissa to help with a meal at Tacoma Rescue Mission, and if you want to make something, she'll tell you what they need, and if you want to serve, they'll tell you how to get set up, where to show up, and what to do, and you can show the love of Christ to our neighbors struggling with homelessness.

It might be a little late at this point ... but you can ask Heidi if there are still needs for VBS this week, for an opportunity to serve not only the covenant children of our congregation, but other children in our area as well, showing them the love of Christ and telling them of the gospel of Christ.

There is our Sunday school ministry, our Women's Ministry of Faith, and others. There is our work with Progress House, our work with NRB, our work with CareNet, and I could go on. We

have people involved with each of these ministries, and there are usually either ways to sign up, or you can contact someone and say, “I don’t know what to do, but I want to do something, tell me how I can serve.”

But often the key is that we stop just thinking about some ideal ministry for us, or some future time when we can do all sorts of things, and instead we find some time – however big or small – and we sign up to put ourselves somewhere where we will be put to work by others for the sake of the local Kingdom of Christ.

God calls us to his gospel mission in our individual lives. He calls us to it in the life of the local church. But then, third, he also calls us to be involved with the mission of Christ globally.

Now, we’re not all called to go into global missions work. But we are called to be a part of it. And this often means that we are called to be connected to global missions, to pray for global missions, and to give to global missions.

And that can be difficult. Most of us struggle with one or more of those things. We mean to pray, but we forget. We mean to stay up to date on missionaries we know, but we forget to stay on top of the updates we receive. We mean to give more, but we forget to look into the best places to give. And when we do that, we call fall into the pattern of just waiting for something to change in us – for the day when we just start praying more on our own, and reading all those newsletters on our own time, and strategically researching where we should give.

But let me be very practical again. And let me say that maybe, instead, you need to put yourself somewhere where you will be told what to do ... not in the future ... but right then and there. In other words, let me make a plug here for our Wednesday night prayer meeting.

Wednesday night prayer meeting is great if you stink at prayer, or you stink keeping up on missionaries, or you stink knowing who to give to. It’s great if you’re good at those things too – but it’s especially good if you stink at them. Because you show up, and we’ll tell you what to do.

We’ll hand you that week’s set of missionary updates, and summarize them for you, and tell you to read them then and there. We’ll have missionaries present and they’ll tell you what they’re doing, and often they’ll say a nicer version of “Hey – we need some more money to do this work. So if you have some money ... maybe you should give it to our work!” And then, for 30, or 45, or 60 minutes we’ll actually pray for the missionaries we know. And there’s nothing else to do in that time. You’ll have no other options. All you can really do ... whether out loud or silently ... is pray.

So, if you are struggling to be one of those people living out their unity in Christ to the global mission of the Church, maybe you should stop waiting until you magically transform into a different person, and just make a commitment to put yourself here physically at 7:00 on Wednesday nights, and then we’ll tell you what to do from there. It’s like a weight-loss app ... but for prayer about global missions.

Whether it is in the details of your own life, or the mission of our local congregation, or the mission of the global Church, how do you need to more fully live out the missional implication of your union with Christ?

That is the second thing to consider.

So we see that we are united to Christ in the hope of the gospel. We see that we are united to Christ in the mission of the gospel.

Implication #3: The Suffering

Third and finally, we see in this passage that we are united to Christ in the suffering of the gospel.

And we see that in verse twenty-four. Paul writes: “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.”

Now, we've got some odd phrases here that we need to unpack. But what's helpful as we do that is to remember that Christ identifies with the suffering of his people, so that their suffering is his suffering. And this point would have been especially clear for Paul.

Paul's conversion came when he was persecuting the Church, and Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. And Jesus said to Paul – who also went by “Saul” at the time – Jesus said to him “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” In his first interaction with Jesus, Jesus told Paul that as far as Jesus was concerned, the persecution of his people was the persecution of him – of Jesus. The suffering of his people was his suffering. Such was the union between Christ and his people.

That was true of Jesus's relationship to the Church then. And Paul knew that now that he had trusted in Christ, it was true of him as well. And so the suffering of Paul, in prison, as he wrote, was the suffering of Jesus. [Wright, TNTC, 90]

When Paul says that he is “filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions” he didn't mean that Christ did not suffer enough and Paul was helping him out. What he meant was that his own suffering was now Christ's suffering too. Christ identifies so much with his people that the suffering of his people is a share in his suffering, and his suffering is identified with their suffering.

In that sense, there was suffering that remained for Christ – but not redemptive suffering in his physical body, but missional suffering in his ecclesiastical body, the Church. The suffering that remained was not part of the atoning work of Christ – that was accomplished on the cross. But the suffering that remained was part of the missional work of Christ. In this way it was suffering “for the sake of his body [...], the church” – as Paul says in verse twenty-four. In that missional sense, suffering remains. And Christ will accomplish it through his people who are united to him. [Wright, TNTC, 93]

One commentator writes: “If all these ideas sound strange to modern ears, this may be not so much due to the distance between Paul and ourselves in time and culture as because the church

has forgotten how to apply to itself the fact that it is the body of the crucified Messiah.” [Wright, TNTC, 93]

Christ’s people, united to him, are called to suffer in their mission, as they love Christ and seek to bless his people.

What does that look like? Well, it plays out whenever we are called on to suffer for the calling Christ has placed on us in our union with him.

The most obvious form of it is worldly opposition: when we suffer because the world opposes us for following Jesus – for some aspect of our faithfulness to him. This is the form that we see in Paul, as he is imprisoned for the gospel. This is the form we see in many times in Church history. And this is a form we must be increasingly ready for. It should not surprise us. Jesus suffered at the hands of unbelievers. If we are truly united to him, then we should not be surprised if we are called to the same thing.

But we should not limit the suffering in view in this passage to “direct outward persecution” – even though that is an important aspect of it. [Wright, TNTC, 94]

For our suffering for the calling of Christ comes not only from the world being resistant to Christ. It also comes, for example, from our own hearts being resistant to Christ. Even as we believe, even as we are made new, still, some part of us remains resistant to the calling of Christ. And for the remainder of our lives we must resist and battle that part of ourselves. And that battle can often include suffering. But that is part of Christ’s mission in our hearts and lives. After all, Christ suffered on the cross in order to overcome our sinful hearts. And if we are truly united to him, then we should not be surprised if we are called to suffer for that goal along with him as well.

And resistance can come even from within the people of God as a community. We see this again and again in the Bible. Other Christians can sin against us, and fail us, and hurt us, and cause additional suffering for us as we try to be faithful. But Christ himself suffered because of the weaknesses, foolishness, and sinfulness of his closest followers. And if we are truly united to him, then we should not be surprised if we are called to suffer in similar ways.

And resistance comes not only from the human agents we have mentioned, but from the physical world we live in as well. This world is cursed by the fall. And it often resists us. We face sickness, or pain, or weakness, that makes it harder for us to do what Jesus calls us to – and increases the suffering of our walk. But Christ himself faced the difficulties of this fallen world, and the challenges of physical weakness and illness and pain and death, both in his own life and in the lives of those he loved. And if we are truly united to him, then we should not be surprised if we too are called on to suffer in similar ways.

In so many ways we share in Christ’s suffering. But we don’t just share in his suffering. We also share in the comfort he offers us. Because he promises to be with us in the midst of our suffering. He promises to draw close to us. To care for us. To carry us through. To call our sufferings his own. And so, in your suffering you are never alone.

When you suffer, Christ, in some sense, shares that experience with us. That is another aspect of our union with him. As we share in his suffering, so we share in his comfort. And as we share in both, we are assured all the more that we really do belong to Christ.

And that is why Paul can say not only that he rejoices despite his suffering, but that he rejoices *in* his suffering. For Paul knows that Christ is with him in his suffering. And that causes him to rejoice. Because he knows that underneath his suffering is the fact that he is united with Christ.

Conclusion

We are united to Christ in his gospel suffering. We are united to Christ in his gospel mission. We are united to Christ in his gospel hope.

These are all important aspects of our text. But underlying all of them – empowering all of them – is the fact that if we have placed our trust in him, then we have union with Christ himself – we have a deep and mysterious connection to the person of Christ, that we receive by faith, and that is forged by the power and the work of the Holy Spirit.

And with the knowledge of our union with Christ, we, like Paul, can face the challenges ahead. Whether suffering, or difficult tasks, or spiritual resistance from without or from within – we can face those challenges and, like Paul in verse twenty-four, we can rejoice. For we know the glorious mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to us. And that glorious mystery is: Christ in us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

- Moo, Douglas J. *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.
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