

“Christ in You, the Hope of Glory”

The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Colossians

Texts: Colossians 1:24–2:5; Daniel 2:17-30

Paul is under house arrest in Rome awaiting his appearance before Caesar. During this time, he will write letters to the churches in Philippi and Colossae, a circular letter to the church in Ephesus, and a personal letter to a man named Philemon—all of which are included in our New Testament. Paul has heard from Epaphras—the pastor of the church in Colossae who is with Paul in Rome—that the church in Colossae is doing well, but that it is now facing a serious challenge from false teaching. An unnamed false teacher (or teachers) was contending that the key to finding spiritual fulfillment is found in a mixture of pagan and Jewish practices, which, from what we glean from Paul’s response, included keeping Sabbaths, observing rigorous dietary laws, worshipping angels and seeking visions. Paul describes this as a philosophy, a human tradition, and an extreme form of self-denial (asceticism). Paul’s response is to affirm the supremacy of Jesus over all things. As we have seen, and will see again, there is much in this letter which speaks to our own situation today—Christians in the midst of an increasingly pagan culture, with false religions and false teachers on every side.

We are continuing our series on Paul’s Epistle to the Colossians. Last time we took up another of the so-called “Christ hymns” cited by Paul in the opening chapter, this time the hymn in Colossians 1:15-20. Our study of this hymn happened to fit perfectly with the fact that it was also the first Sunday in Advent. As we saw, this particular Christ hymn reveals a great deal about the person and work of Jesus, who, as the hymn affirms, is the very image of God and the creator of all things. As firstborn from the dead, Jesus begins his work of new creation when he conquers sin and death in his resurrection. It is Jesus who reconciles rebellious sinners unto God and then incorporates those reconciled into his church. Since the Sundays in Advent focus upon the Incarnation of Jesus (his supernatural conception) leading up to Christmas (Jesus’ birth) it was quite appropriate to begin Advent by looking at one of the most important Christological passages in all the New Testament. Just who it is who came to save us from our sins—Jesus, the very image of God, in whom God’s fulness was pleased to dwell, who is also firstborn from the dead, and head of his church.

This time out, we will see another similar (if unintended) connection between Paul’s discussion of Jesus as “the hope of glory,” and that one in whom hidden mysteries are revealed, and this, the second Sunday of Advent. Traditionally, the second Sunday of Advent is devoted to John the Baptists’ role in pointing Israel to the coming of the Messiah—focusing upon the expectation and hope that the promised redeemer would finally come to save his people. And so, when in Colossians 1:27 Paul speaks of Jesus as the hope of glory, and then in chapter 2:3 points out that in Jesus the wisdom and knowledge of God are revealed, we are directed by Paul to consider the incarnation as the revelation of God’s glory, and whose return at the end of the age is the hope of all believers in Jesus. Such hope is a good thing to consider, especially in light of the fact that this is the second Sunday in Advent.

As we turn to our text, Colossians 1:24-2:5, we come to a new section of the Colossian letter in which the Apostle Paul describes the nature of the mystery revealed to him—that in Jesus’ incarnation and messianic mission to Israel, God has fulfilled his promise to redeem his people from sin’s guilt and its power. To accomplish this, Jesus (who is the creator of all things and the very image of God) took to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin and came to earth to reconcile sinners to God through his once

for all sacrifice for sin—his blood shed for us upon the cross, reminding us of the difficult but obvious truth that Jesus must suffer and die to save us from our sins. As that one entrusted to preach this message to the Gentiles, Paul explains the hardships he has endured for the cause of Christ and his church—including the Christians in Colossae. As Paul told the Colossians (v. 23), it is to this work of preaching that God has called Paul as a minister of the gospel.

Paul is writing to a church which he did not found and had never visited—the Colossians know of Paul, but do not know Paul. Having offered his thanksgiving for God’s work among the Colossians, and then having prayed for them (in verses 3-14), Paul moves on in the next section of this letter to express his concern for these brothers and sisters whom he has never met and yet with whom he shares a common bond in Jesus. Unlike the church in Philippi, or the church in Ephesus, both of which Paul was instrumental in founding, Paul sends no personal greetings to this church, except to a man named Archippus, who was a minister in the area. We do not find in Colossians (as we did in Philippians) the sense that Paul knew well those to whom he was writing and who together could recall both the difficulties under which the church in Philippi was founded and the joy which followed as the church became established. But Paul has heard what the Colossians were facing from their pastor, a man named Epaphras, who was probably converted under Paul’s preaching during his third missionary journey, and who was with Paul in Rome when this epistle was written.

Paul learned from Epaphras that the churches in the Lycus Valley (a region in Western Asia Minor—now Turkey) were doing quite well, but now facing an energized form of paganism, labeled the Colossian heresy by modern biblical scholars, which was beginning to make inroads in the churches located there. Paul writes this epistle (the Letter to the Colossians) at the request of Epaphras as a refutation of of this false teaching, the specifics of which remain somewhat mysterious to us. Paul does not identify by name or explain the origins of those teaching that “spiritual fullness” was to be found in vain philosophy, man-made traditions, mysticism and sensuality, along with some sort of religious legalism. The Colossian heresy, may have had its roots in Judaism, but was clearly syncretistic (a mixture of a number of religious impulses). Whatever the specifics of the Colossian heresy, Paul’s answer to it is to argue for the supremacy of Jesus over all things. Citing a “Christ hymn” in the previous verses (Colossians 1:15-20), Paul reminds the Colossians not to be tempted by such things since “*in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*” (Colossians 1:19). Paul cites (or composes) the Christ hymn, thereby reminding the Colossians of their common confession of Jesus as God and man, the creator of all things, as well as the redeemer of his people, and the head of the church, with all other apostolic churches.

In verse 24, Paul speaks of the hardships he has endured on behalf of all of Christ’s churches, including the Colossians. Paul is not complaining, in fact, he rejoices. Why the apostle can rejoice requires a bit of explanation. “*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.*” Paul’s sufferings give him an important point in common with the first Christian churches—they too, in many cases have entered into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings.¹ Paul knows what the members of these churches have suffered—he too has suffered. Yet he rejoices—as he told the Philippians (3:10), it was his desire “*that I may know [Jesus] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.*” Paul understood how difficult it was to confess faith in Jesus in the midst of a pagan culture, and he could offer them comfort as a fellow-sufferer with Christ.

¹ Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 81.

The more difficult expression here is Paul's statement that through his sufferings, he is "*filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body.*" To start with, the verb Paul uses (*antanaplēroō*) is rare—a verb with two prepositions added. Paul somehow sees himself as "filling up" what was lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions. But what does Paul mean by this? How could Paul add anything to what Jesus has done? Based on what is said elsewhere by Paul, we know that he is not saying that he is filling up what was lacking in Christ's redemptive work as second Adam—ushering in the new creation by virtue of his resurrection from the dead.² Paul has just made this perfectly clear in 1:19-20—we have already received redemption and the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus.

One possible answer as to what Paul means is found in Jewish messianic expectation of the first century, the thought world in which Paul lived and worked. It was widely understood by many Jews of Paul's day that there would be significant "messianic woes" which must be endured by God's people immediately before the coming of the Messiah—a time of great tribulation as foretold in Daniel. Paul, firmly believed that Christ's coming had ushered in the last days. He saw this expectation of tribulation fulfilled in the suffering which Jesus had endured, which he himself had endured, and which the people of God (the Christians in the churches to whom Paul is writing) were presently enduring. What Paul was filling up and what was lacking in Christ's afflictions and for the sake of his body, the church, was perhaps, the tribulation and affliction of God's people as new members of Christ's kingdom who now faced opposition from the kingdom of darkness.³

Further clarification as to what Paul means by "filling what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" comes from the prophecies in Isaiah of the coming suffering servant and their use by Paul in several passages in his preaching and epistles. As interpreted by Jesus and the Apostles, Isaiah's prophecy of the servant of YHWH refers to the coming Messiah (Jesus). Yet in one place it refers to Israel (Isaiah 49:3). "*And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.'*" Jesus is the true Israel, but here Isaiah seems to refer to the nation as a people. Jews have long referred to this passage in an attempt to refute the Christian interpretation of Isaiah's suffering servant as Jesus (which is clearly taught in Acts 3:13; Romans 4:25; Hebrews 9:28, 1 Peter 2:22-25).

In this instance (Isaiah 49:3-6), there is a solidarity between the servant of YHWH and YHWH's people who will also suffer as does the servant. So, it is quite remarkable when Paul and Barnabas are in Pisidian Antioch preaching to pagans (Acts 13:47) and Paul quotes Isaiah 49:6, declaring, "*for so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'*" As Paul sees it, the suffering servant (Jesus) is to be proclaimed to the nations by Christ's disciples, himself and Barnabas—who are also identified in some sense with that suffering servant, just as Israel had been.⁴ There is a solidarity (a union perhaps) between the true servant of YHWH (Jesus) and his people (Israel), then later with the witnesses to Jesus in the church.

Add to this passages such as 2 Corinthians 1:5-6, where Paul states "*for as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when*

² Moo, Colossians, 151.

³ Moo, Colossians, 151-152.

⁴ Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 82-84.

you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer,” and 2 Corinthians 4:10-12, where Paul writes *“always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.”* In these verses and we find a definite sense in which Paul sees his own apostolic work and suffering as somehow to be identified with Jesus and his sufferings. Paul rejoices, not because he is a masochist, but as Jesus’ chosen apostle to the Gentiles, he is identified with Christ by participating in his suffering, and thereby is *“filling up the afflictions of Jesus.”*

Let us be clear: Paul’s own suffering adds nothing to the finished work of Christ in saving his people from the guilt and power of sin. But Paul does have a profound theology of suffering, which gives deep meaning to that suffering which he and God’s people have experienced for the cause of Christ. To be identified with Jesus in his suffering begins with Paul’s proclamation of Jesus’ suffering and dying (the gospel). It also entails filling up the afflictions which Paul must endure, and which Jesus’ people must endure, even as Jesus endured such things (including persecution and suffering). Since Paul’s own suffering accomplishes this “filling up” on behalf of Christ’s body, the church, Paul can rejoice. He knows that it is not the random forces of the universe, or the cruel fates smacking him around because he rejects the Greek and Roman gods. Paul knows all of this was God’s purpose for him and for his people—filling up (adding to) the afflictions which Jesus experienced and which we will experience. This is why Paul rejoices. This is one sign of his union with Christ, and gives him great comfort as he does the Lord’s work, which for him, has been very costly—something the Colossians ought to consider when they read and digest the contents of this letter. This is why they should rejoice.

In verses 25-27, Paul explains that he became *“a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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.”* There is much packed into these verses. The first thing we should say is that as an Apostle of Jesus, whose own ministry somehow fulfills Christ’s afflictions, Paul explains to the Colossians the nature of his apostolic ministry—which is essentially to be the steward of the mysteries which God has revealed in Jesus.

Those familiar with Paul’s personal history as recounted in Acts 8-9 know—we don’t know how much of Paul’s personal history the Colossians knew—that Paul’s calling to this office was the result of the direct intervention of God. When Jesus appeared to Paul on his way to Damascus, Jesus commissioned him as the apostle to the Gentiles. In doing so, God gave to Paul the stewardship of preaching the gospel and making known to all that which had been hidden for ages. The word “stewardship” here means something like “custodianship” or even a “commissioning,” which ought to be understood in the sense of Paul’s comments in Ephesians 3:9, when he writes that he is called *“to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things.”*⁵ As steward of what had been hidden, Paul shines the light of the gospel in the dark, revealing what had been a mystery.

The critical term (and one of the emphases of Paul’s theology) is “mystery.” *Mystērion* refers to something hidden or unknown. When Paul uses the term it refers to that which is revealed in and through the person and work of Jesus, and through which the riches and glory of God are made plain (manifest). The mystery revealed is tied directly to the word of God, which provides the content of the gospel which

⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, 153-154.

Paul has been preaching to fill up the affiliations of Christ and his people. In the Pauline sense, then, the mystery to which he refers is something which has been revealed—that which lay hidden in ages past, i.e., in God’s word—but not revealed until the coming of Jesus. The “mystery” is the prophetic teaching of the Old Testament which pointed ahead to the messianic mission of Jesus, but which was unintelligible until our Lord’s incarnation and messianic mission.

This is why we speak of the Old Testament in terms of promise, type, shadow, and the New Testament in terms of fulfillment, reality, and light. In this sense, reading the Old Testament is like walking into a large room full of objects with the lights off. When the light comes on, you can now see what you could not see before. Nothing has been added to what was there all along, but now you can see many things which you did not see or notice before. The coming of Jesus, in effect, serves that purpose for the Old Testament. He is the light who enables us to see that he was there all along, hidden in darkness—the promises of redemptive history not yet fulfilled. This is what Paul is getting at when he speaks of this mystery now being revealed through Paul’s preaching. Paul’s ministry is instrumental in revealing what had been hidden in the Old Testament—the person and work of Jesus hidden in types and shadows.

As we have come to expect from Paul, there are loud echoes here from the Old Testament. The word “mystery” as associated with God’s eschatological prophet (the Messiah) has an important background in the sense as used here by Paul, and found in Daniel 2 (and 4:6), when Daniel makes known (reveals) to Nebuchadnezzar what had been revealed to him in his dream. There is a strong connection between the sentence Paul writes in Colossians 1:26-27 and Daniel 2:19-22, 28-30, which we read as our Old Testament lesson, words like “mystery,” “hidden,” “wisdom,” and “understanding/made known,” appear in both passages.

Daniel’s “mystery” has to do with the establishment of a great eschatological kingdom (a future kingdom for Daniel) associated with the coming Messiah off in the distant future (at the time when the fourth empire, Rome, is crushed by a rock made without hands). Surely, Paul was familiar with Daniel 2, and when speaking of the revelation of a mystery, quite naturally echoes Daniel’s point using words and phrases found throughout Daniel 2. Paul’s point is that the revelation of the hidden mystery in his own preaching, indicates that the kingdom which Daniel saw in his vision is in the process of being established through the proclamation of the person and work of Christ.⁶ That which had been hidden for ages past (Daniel writes in the seventh century BC) is now revealed in the person and work of Jesus. What Daniel foresaw in his dream, is now underway in human history. YHWH’s promise is becoming fulfillment. Types are becoming reality. Shadows give way to light. Or, to put it as Paul does, what was hidden (the mystery) is now being revealed (in Christ).

Given that Jesus Christ is the content of the mystery hidden for ages past but now revealed, that mystery of which Paul is custodian, in verse 29 he reiterates to the Colossians that “*Him [Jesus] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.*” Paul does not preach himself, but he proclaims Christ, not just to the Colossians, but to “everyone”—the Greek word *pas* (everyone) is used here four times by Paul, and the phrase (*panta anthrōpon*) appears three times. In verse 6 of this chapter, Paul has spoken of the gospel “*which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing.*” This has two intended effects. One is to remind the Colossians that the gospel which Paul preaches to all the churches, is the same one they heard and received from Epaphras. Second, this gospel, being universal in its

⁶ Beale and Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, 857-859.

proclamation, unites the Colossians to all other Christians who have heard it and embraced Jesus through faith. They are not alone. Paul proclaims the gospel which Jesus had given to him, and he teaches the churches about this Jesus' person and work from the pages of the Old Testament.

The purpose in preaching this gospel and teaching Christians about Jesus (Christian wisdom) is to prepare God's people to be presented unto him on the last day, fully prepared to face the judgment,⁷ because our sins are forgiven, we are righteous in Christ, and we have grown from babes into mature Christians, ready to stand before our maker—in Christ, not on our own. Indeed, Paul can say, "*for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*" Paul does not and cannot do this in his own strength. He cannot endure such suffering on his own. He must rely upon the power of Christ—who made the earth with but a word, and who was raised from the dead. Paul may be weak. Christ is not. And it is Jesus' power on whom Paul relies, as should we.

Even though he does not know the Colossians nor their neighbors in Laodicea, Paul wants them to know of his care and concern for them. In 2:1-2 he tells those who will hear or read this letter, first in Colossae and then in Laodicea, "*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.*" Paul wants the Colossians to be encouraged in the midst of their struggles by reminding them that he and they have been knit together in love. Because the mystery revealed in Jesus is real to them through the gospel preached to them, they will have full assurance in the knowledge and understanding that Jesus' saving work in new creation—reconciling, forgiving them, and incorporating them into his body (the church), is every bit as true for them as it is for Paul. The false teachers cannot take this knowledge from them, if the Colossians hold fast to the word preached to them.

At the end of verse 2 and into verse 3, we have what might be the summary statement of the entire epistle. It is one of the most powerful sentences in the New Testament. At the very least it is the literary high point of the epistle—"*Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" This is Paul's point in a nutshell. We find in Jesus all that we need to find wisdom (*sophia*) and knowledge (*gnosis*)—the very things which the pagans claim to possess, but of which they have no clue. Christ is the treasure revealed and given to us by God. Jesus is our inheritance—that one in whom all the promises of God are fulfilled. Jesus is the full revelation of all things previously hidden in the Old Testament. To know Jesus by faith is to possess all wisdom. To know Jesus by faith is to possess the knowledge of those things which pagans endlessly seek but will never find. To know Jesus is to know that truth which philosophers endlessly debate without ever reaching—Jesus is the reason, source, and explanation of the mysteries of creation, life, and God's purpose for human history. These treasures are revealed to us in Christ, but completely hidden from those who insist upon seeking these things elsewhere.

This is Paul's answer to the Colossians facing this unspecified heresy. In fact, he says in verse 4, "*I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.*" Christ's supremacy over all things is the answer to the Colossian heresy. Christ's supremacy is the answer to all human dilemmas. Remaining confident in the knowledge that Jesus is both creator of all things and firstborn from the dead, there is no reason to accept any of the arguments offered by the false teachers and their heresy. Yet this is not just an intellectual debate with someone winning and someone losing. This is a matter of the souls of God's people being endangered by those offering a false spiritual fullness.

⁷ Moo, Colossians, 161.

So it is important for Paul to make clear to the Colossians that he is no impartial observer, but that he (as a person and in his office as Apostle to the Gentiles) is heavily invested in the outcome of this struggle. He reminds them, “*for though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.*” Paul is in Rome, but as he writes this letter he is drawn to those receiving it in far away Colossae. He is with them in spirit and he rejoices with them that the church there is doing things in accordance with apostolic teaching and holding firm in Christ, in the face of this onslaught of pagan teaching.

What, then, do we take away from this text by way of application? We find ourselves facing the same kind of vain philosophies, human traditions, and false religions as the Colossians were facing. The names of the false teachers are different, the philosophies, traditions, and religions have been updated a bit, but it is still pretty much the same stuff. Some sort of vague spirituality is the goal, truth is replaced by feelings, and many are claiming to show us the way. But why should we follow such people? We have heard Paul’s preaching. We are united to Jesus in the fellowship of his suffering. We already know that all the wisdom, knowledge, and fullness of God (true spirituality) are found in the mystery once long hidden, the person and work of Jesus, that one in whom true wisdom and knowledge are now revealed, the only one of whom it may be said—*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*