

“Christ in You, the Hope of Glory”

Colossians 1:24-29

Sunday, March 19th, 2023

You might be a small town pastor if...

- The congregation seems to double in size when the choir sits down in the pews.
- You receive bags of fruit and vegetables for Pastor Appreciation.
- You spend more time at the hospital than the doctor does.
- Your largest worship attendance is on the Sundays you're not preaching.

I'm a rural guy - I love the countryside. Most of my childhood we lived on my Dad's family farm - Maple Lawn Farm - in Stephenson County, 10 miles east of Freeport. We worshipped at the Methodist church in Pecatonica, some 7 miles to the east. The population of Pecatonica then was about 1,800, half the size of Aledo today.

I'm not only rural, I'm small town. So it should come as no surprise that I favor ministering in a rural, small-town setting.

Rural or small-town churches have been declining at an alarming rate in recent years. Nearly ½ of America's 2,050 rural counties lost population through net outmigration the past 20 years.

Over ⅓ (which is more than 700) rural counties lost more than 10% of their population over the past 20 years through net outmigration. The population of Mercer County when we arrived here in November 2001 was just over 16,900; today that number is less than 15,500.

About 60 AD, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church in Colossae, located in the south of what is Turkey today. That church was located in a once-thriving city, but its population gradually declined until the historian Strabo, just a few years before Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians, referred to it as a “small town.” Colossae was prosperous previously because it was located on a main trade route. But its fortunes changed when the road was rerouted and Colossae was bypassed. By Paul's day, the Colossian church was located in the smallest town of all the churches he wrote to in the New Testament.

The late Francis Schaeffer once wrote, “In God's sight, there are no little people, and there are no little places.”

With today's passage of Scripture, we finish the first chapter of four in the New Testament book of Colossians. This sermon study is titled, “The Preeminent Christ: A Collision with Colossians.”

Colossians 1:24-29:

“**24** I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, **25** of which I became a minister according to the a stewardship from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, **26** the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. **27** To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. **28** Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. **29** To this *end* I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.”

We'll explore this text by way of this roadmap:

- **Paul's sufferings (persecutions) on behalf of the Church** (verse 24);
- **God's Plan of Redemption - The Mystery** (verses 26-27);
- **Perfection in Christ** (verse 28).

Verse 24 presents two difficult matters - rejoicing in suffering and filling up what lacks in Jesus' afflictions. Let's look more closely at the first matter - **Paul's rejoicing in his suffering**. Verse 24 begins, “I now rejoice in my sufferings for you,” When he was taken to prison in Rome, Paul understood the adversity that lay ahead. These are his words in **Acts Chapter 20:22-23** “I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment (chains) and afflictions await me...”. Even so, Paul says here that he rejoices in those sufferings and persecutions.

From a purely secular perspective, the idea of rejoicing in sufferings is preposterous. Someone has even called it “baptized masochism.” (Hughes, 44)

- But **Romans 5:3** speaks of exulting in tribulations; “...we also **glory** in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance;”
- **1 Peter 4:13** says we are to suffer and rejoice. Peter writes, “but **rejoice** to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy.”
- **Acts 5:41** tells of Peter and the other apostles rejoicing that they had been counted “worthy” to suffer. “So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were **counted worthy to suffer shame** for His (Jesus) name.”

We remember that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the church in Colossae; imprisonment was (and is) no easy existence. It consists of restrictions, deprivations, punishments, uncertainty, rogue justice, bodily injury, mental cruelties, and isolation. Paul could have suffered multiples of these.

The apostle's life is a clear example of the maxim that the vocation of the church is suffering. Likewise, our lives, brothers and sisters in Christ, will be punctuated with persecution, either externally or internally. All of us have, are, and will suffer for our faith in Jesus Christ. Sometimes this is readily seen, sometimes it is internal, and not readily seen.

Commentator N.T. Wright gives us some examples of the inner struggles we may have as believers in Christ, "the long, slow battle with temptation or sickness, the agonizing anxieties of Christian responsibilities for a family or a church, and the constant doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith are all examples of internal suffering." (Wright, 90)

Christianity is not a lone ranger proposition. You cannot exist for long living apart from the fellowship of the gathered people of God in worship. When God saved us to Himself, He saved us also to His Church. We have both the privilege and responsibility to pray for one another, and to support each other, especially in time of need. Such relationships are not possible through screens or merely reading sermons. Such relationships are composed of flesh and blood ministry to one another. The relationships we have as redeemed people are indeed sweet.

There is a second matter raised in verse 24 - **Filling up what lacks in Jesus' afflictions.** Paul says he will, "fill up in (his) flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church," "This is one of the most debated verses in all of Scripture! We know this can't mean that Paul made up for what was lacking in the atoning sacrifices of Christ, for the whole of (the book of) Colossians as well as the rest of the New Testament teaches the sufficiency of Christ in (salvation). Paul did not help with the atonement; that was Christ's solo work." (Hughes, 45)

I find William Hendriksen's comments helpful here. "The enemies of Christ hated Jesus with insatiable hatred, and wanted to add to his afflictions. But since he is no longer physically present on earth, their arrows, which are meant especially for Him, strike His followers. It is in that sense that all true believers are in his stead supplying what, as the enemies see it, is lacking in the afflictions which Christ endured." (Hendriksen, 87)

Paul says here that his struggles are for the sake of Christ's body, the Church. Paul knew his sufferings were good for the church and that they brought to him a special closeness with Christ. Every blow that fell on him fell on his Master, and thus bound them ever closer together in mutual suffering. This is why Paul, praying from prison,

instructed the Philippian Christians, “I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death,” (**Philippians 3:10**)

Jesus is persecuted in the bodies of his followers. Be strong, dear ones, knowing that your suffering is known by a loving God, and limited by the One who made you and takes care of you, both in this life and the next.

With verses 26 and 27, **Paul speaks of the mystery of God’s plan for redemption.** A “**mystery**” which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. **27** To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this **mystery** among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

To us, a mystery is a puzzle, or something eerie and frightening.

My best friend growing up was Troy Meyer; many of you met him when he was here for Sunday worship a few weeks ago. I remember many Friday nights at 10:30, we’d tune in the radio and listen to the *CBS Radio Mystery Theater*. It began with the creaking of a door opening slowly, and haunting music to follow. We’d be scared before the episode even started!

To the false teachers in Colossae, a mystery was a sacred secret that was only known to a select few. Conversely, the mystery Paul speaks of here is God’s secret plan, anticipated in visions and symbols by hold men of old, and now at last unveiled before all God’s people. That mystery was going to be extended to the Gentiles. From the ancient Jewish perspective, this seemed impossible because of the mutual disdain which Gentiles and especially Jews had for one another.

Ephesians 3:4-6 reveals it clearly - “...you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

I love how verse 27 ends - “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” What God revealed here through the Apostle Paul is the hallmark of the New Covenant. “Christ in You” - God Himself, in the person of Christ, will be directly and personally present in the lives of His people, and - “the Hope of Glory” - His presence assures them of a future life with Him when He returns to earth.

Verse 28 could be a good mission statement for the New Testament church - “Him (Jesus) we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” Paul wrote these words to a small church,

remember. Words mentioned throughout today's passage of Scripture may have been unfathomable to the little Colossian church, which likely met in someone's home. The theme of fullness, completeness, perfection, and maturity is what verse 28 addresses. This can be done as easily in a small church as it is in a large church, if not more so.

It begins through the preaching of the Word. God's word is suitable for warning and wisdom, Paul says here; to grow in Christ is to grow in spiritual maturity. And that is what Jesus has in store for each of us who have called upon the Lord Jesus for salvation. The preaching of the Word of God is to be central to the life of the church.

Retired small town pastor Ron Klassen writes in his book, *Maximize! Leveraging the Strengths of Your Small Church*, "The small church is the total package. It is the right size to fulfill all that our God calls the church to be and do. Every biblical purpose for the church can be fulfilled just as well in a small church as in a large church." (Klassen, 35)

Isn't that simply wonderful? Smallish congregations like ours can be just as effective at making disciples as larger congregations. We must be intentional in reaching out to each other. The fellowship times after worship in the back room, the pews of the sanctuary, or standing in the foyer are the ground where the seeds of friendship and love are planted. Going out to lunch together Sunday after worship is another way to keep us in touch with one another and our needs. Such relationships span any diversities we may have and surely to be prized by God's people.

- **Paul's sufferings (Persecutions) on behalf of the Church;** Paul's sufferings came about because he doggedly proclaimed Jesus Christ as Lord. The same is true of our sufferings for Christ - we must start with understanding how our walk with the Lord is going. If you are not suffering for Christ in some way, it will happen. If the world hated Jesus, it will also hate you if you're a Christian.
- **God's Plan of Redemption - The Mystery;** that Gentiles and Jews would be united together in Christ and in the Church.
- **Perfection in Christ.** Spiritually complete, mature in Christian living.

On Sunday, January 6th, 1850, a blizzard hit England, and 15-year old Charles was unable to reach the church he usually attended. He turned down a street and ducked into a Primitive Methodist Church, finding only a few people standing around the stove. Not even the preacher arrived.

A thin-looking man stood and read **Isaiah 45:22**, "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I *am* God, and *there is* no other." The speaker groping for something to say, kept repeating the text. Finally, he spied young Charles in the back. Pointing his bony finger at the boy, the thin man cried, "Look, young man! Look! Look to Christ!"

The young man did look. And this little church sent forth a preaching dynamo who became history's most widely-read preacher. Today there is more material written by this preacher than any Christian author of any generation. He was called the "Prince of Preachers." He seldom preached to fewer than 6,000, and on one occasion, his audience numbered almost 24,000. During his lifetime, this preacher preached to approximately 10,000,000 people.

His name - Charles Haddon Spurgeon. He proves that smaller ponds often yield the biggest fish!