

Colossians 1 v 24 - 27

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[0 : 0 0] verses 24 and following this evening. That's where we got up to a few weeks ago. So I'm going to read those verses again from verse 24 through to 27.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church. I've become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness, the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. All of us will have heard of C.S. Lewis, probably best known for his Narnia series of stories which are Christian allegories, beginning of course with The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe. But Lewis was a prolific writer, Christian writer, and wrote many other books as well. Mere Christianity, A Defense of the Christian Faith, The Screwtape Letters, which is a humorous insight into some of the spiritual warfare that Christians face. But the most personal book that he wrote was called A Grief Observed. It was written out of his own experiences of grief and anguish at the death of his wife. And from that book and from the struggle he wrote a further book called The

Problem of Pain, in which he sought to reconcile the Christian belief in a just, loving, and omnipotent God and the pain and suffering which is experienced in the world. The problem of pain is still and always will be a puzzle for God's people. It's a puzzle and a struggle for every Christian. Pain and suffering for those who follow and live for Christ. And Paul, of course, who writes this letter that we have, was someone who didn't shy away from talking about his own sufferings. In fact, it's clear that he was a man who suffered very much as he sought to live for the Lord Jesus Christ. It was part of much of his experience. Even as he writes this letter to the Christians at Colossus, he speaks about the fact that he is in prison. He's writing from his prison cell. Many of his letters, in fact, were the same.

He speaks about that later in the chapter, particularly at the end. And I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains. And they would have been physical chains. They weren't just a euphemism, if I can put it that way, for being in jail. Elsewhere, he speaks about being chained to a Roman soldier in one of his letters, physically chained down.

And Paul, like the rest of the Bible, doesn't hide the truth that to be a Christian must include suffering. It's not something which is just a possibility. It's not something which might happen or just happens to a few. It's something that every Christian, everyone who follows Christ will, at some time, experience. Here's Peter as he writes to the believers in his first letter.

[3 : 28] Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. That's how we can react sometimes, can't we, to suffering as Christians. This shouldn't be happening. In some areas of the church, it's even taught that this mustn't happen. But the Bible and New Testament makes it very clear. To follow Jesus means we share in every part of his life. And that means not just sharing in the glory and the blessings, but sharing in the suffering and the pain. You see, to be a Christian is to be united with Christ. It's to be brought into a relationship with him. It's to be brought into a union with Christ.

He with us and us with him. And there are those sufferings that the Christian has, which no one else in the world experiences. Now, as Christians, we experience the everyday sufferings, the sufferings that many others experience because we live in a fallen, a broken world. But as Christians, there are extra sufferings, extra pains, extra troubles that come uniquely because we belong to Christ.

That's sometimes why people are put off from following the Lord Jesus. If we present the gospel as it is to be presented, then we present the gospel that says, you must take up your cross and follow Christ. To present a gospel that simply says, come to Jesus and all your problems are solved, is half a gospel and in fact a false gospel. The gospel must be, yes, there is joy unlimited in Christ, blessings beyond number in Christ, but there is a cost to following him, a cost which means suffering for him. And it's these sufferings that Paul refers to now when he shares with the Colossians what it means for him to follow Christ. Now I rejoice in what was suffered, he says. We know Paul's sufferings, he lists some of them in 2 Corinthians 11, doesn't he? They were a mixture. They were the sufferings of persecution, stoned, beaten with rods, all sorts of very nasty things happening to him.

But there was also the sufferings that came just about the fact that he was traveling to share the gospel, shipwrecks, hungry, naked, thirsty. It was as he followed Christ, it wasn't that people opposed him all the time, but even the very following of Jesus, the very active following, the very active taking the gospel was costly and included suffering. N.T. Wright writes in his commentary on this passage something which I think is important for us to realize as well. He says, we would be wrong to think of suffering, that is Christian suffering, only in terms of direct outward persecution. The church must always be ready for such and must support in prayer, in practical help those who face it. But all Christians will suffer for their faith in one way or another, if not outwardly, then inwardly. Through the long, slow battle with temptation or with sickness, the agonizing anxieties of Christian responsibility for a family or for a church, the constant doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith. And then he quotes from Hamlet, a thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. And as Christians there are those sufferings that we have, sufferings inwardly because of anxiety over loved ones without

Christ. Concerns and anxieties over the church that we are a part of. And if we're honest, and of course as we know it through the case, when we are part of a church, we're part of an imperfect body of people.

[7 : 11] And we upset one another, and we hurt one another, often not meaning to, but we do. And that's part of being in a fellowship of God's people. It's far to following Christ. There are so many struggles and trials that the Christian knows that the non-Christian doesn't know. Aaron shared just a bit of that himself with going to university as a Christian young man, the temptations and the struggles that were there. Non-Christian young people who go to university don't have those temptations. They just go with the flow. Christian is somebody who has to go against the flow. Therefore it's hard, it's difficult at times, not just in uni, but in the workplace, in the school, even in the home at times too.

And so there are all sorts of sufferings. And Paul says here of his sufferings. But what really grabs us is not just that he mentions the reality of suffering. What really grabs our attention is this, his reaction to his sufferings. Because instead of feeling sorry for himself, or complaining at his harsh treatment, or moaning to the Colossian Christians how difficult it is to be an apostle, now they should all feel sorry for him, or have a whip round, or something like that, he tells them that he rejoices in what was suffered. Now I rejoice in what was suffered.

How does Paul rejoice? And what does it mean for him to rejoice in what was suffered? And if Paul rejoices in these sufferings, these Christian sufferings, these things which are unique to the believer, does that mean that we are to rejoice in them? And how are we to do that? And what is the cause of our rejoicing in the midst of them? Now the first thing we need to notice, of course, is what Paul has to say about these sufferings. He says, I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church. Do you notice that? He speaks of suffering for the church, for you, and for the sake of Christ's body. Now what are we to understand by this statement?

It can be a little bit vexing, especially when he speaks about filling up in his flesh what's still lacking. What on earth is he talking about? Well, we need to clarify, don't we? We need to clarify what he's not saying. It's important that we get out of the way what he's not saying. He's not saying this.

He's not saying that his suffering is equal to Christ's suffering in that it was an atonement on the cross or atoning sacrifice for sin. He's not saying that he's suffering as Christ did.

[9 : 48] In fact, the word that, and that NIV is very helpful here because the NIV uses two words. In verse 24 it uses the word suffered, and later in verse 24 the word afflictions, and they are two different words. Some translations just do the word suffering and suffered, two different words.

And the second word afflictions is never used of Christ's suffering on the cross in the New Testament. It's always a word which is translated elsewhere, the pressures or the troubles, and speaking therefore about something of Christ's struggles when he lived amongst us, not the cross.

So Paul is not saying my suffering is an atoning suffering, like Christ's suffering on the cross. And therefore, of course, he's not saying that Christ's atonement and suffering on the cross was insufficient, and that Paul has to sort of top it up. Again, that's something that some aspects of the church teach, that Christ suffered so much and atoned for so much, but the saints, Paul and others, they went through such things and did such things to tap up on our behalf, so we can tap into their grace and resources. No, he's not saying that at all. It's not there in any way. We need to make that clear. He's not saying that. What is he saying then? Well, he's saying this, that he's suffering because he is a servant of the church, Christ's body. That includes the Colossians for you and for Christ's body. It's part of the cost of being an apostle. Part of the cost of being a gospel minister is that he suffers for the church. Part of servanthood. Christ was a servant, wasn't he?

And he was a suffering servant. And those who are the servants of Christ will also suffer like him. He also is saying something here which we need to grasp. He's speaking about the fact that his suffering is for the good and the blessing of the church. What was suffered for you, for your sake, for the sake of the church is a benefit to be had by the suffering of Paul for the Colossian Christians and for the church? Well, in what way? How? Several different thoughts, perhaps. His suffering for the church, in one sense, was a blessing to them because he was taking some of the heat off the church by his suffering. In other words, he was sort of drawing the enemy fire. I like war films and cowboy films and all that sort of thing. And then, you know, they'd all be pinned down in the bunker. And then one of them say, you know, you make a run for it. I'm going to draw their fire. I'm going to draw their attention. And in one sense, they run off and all the enemy guns aim at them and shoot at them so that they, others are perhaps less attacked. That's the sense as well, what Paul is saying here. As the enemy is concentrating upon me, then hopefully the church is being led off a bit easier. And he rejoices in that, that he can suffer for them in that way and take some of the flack. But also, we realize that when we see Paul suffering, there is an example which encourages other Christians to stand up for Christ. He mentions this in his earlier letter, Philippians chapter 1. He says this, because of my chains, my imprisonment, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of the God more courageously and fearlessly. In other words, they'd been a bit scared, scaredy cats about witnessing for

Jesus. But they'd seen Paul willing to suffer and be in prison. And they were emboldened. They thought, well, if Paul can do it, if Paul's willing to suffer in that way, well, why can't we? And so his example was a great encouragement and suffering for the church. But also in his suffering and the comfort that God gave him when he suffered, there was blessing too. Our preacher last week touched a little bit on this in 2 Corinthians and chapter 1, but it's there in verse 5 and 6.

[13 : 50] For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer.

And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so you also share in our comfort. As Paul suffered, he received the help and the comfort of the Lord.

And that, again, encouraged God's people to realize that there was comfort for them in their sufferings, that God was with them and wasn't deserting them. And then finally, we could say, and there may be other reasons we can think of too, but finally, surely, because Paul was imprisoned and suffering in this way, many of the letters we have have been written. It's possible, but of course, we know that God is sovereign in all this. But if we think humanly speaking, if Paul had not been imprisoned, he'd have been too busy to write letters. He'd have been preaching and going out and about and planting churches. He wouldn't have had time to write letters. But God, in his mercy and grace, placed him in prison, put him in one spot to get him to write letters for our blessing and for the church. Just as an aside, let me remind you of this truth, dear friends, that there are times when God puts us to one side. We may say, well, in old age, I can't do anything for the Lord. Or in infirmity, I can't do anything for the Lord like I used to when I was young and agile and I could do all these things. Well, perhaps the Lord has placed you aside. He's put you in, maybe even if we might say, a prison of a weak and frail body. But it doesn't mean that he stopped being able to use you.

It doesn't mean he hasn't got a purpose for you. It may be that you can be a great blessing through the telephone, through writing letters to missionaries. Who knows? Through praying for the work of the gospel, which perhaps you were too busy to do when you were active.

Seek the Lord. Ask him to open doors for you that you might serve him even in your suffering and difficulties. So here's Paul. He says, for your sake, I was suffering. But he was suffering as well.

[16 : 05] And one of the encouragements and reasons for his rejoicing in his suffering was that it was to him the mark and sign that he truly was the Lord's. That he truly was the Lord's man. Notice he goes on and says, I've become its servant. That's the church's servant by the commission God gave me.

When Jesus was teaching in his earthly ministry, one of the most famous places, of course, is the Sermon on the Mount. And he begins with what we call the Beatitudes, the blessings. And at the end of those blessings, this is what he says, blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven. For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. For Paul to suffer was to him an assurance that he was doing the Lord's work. It was this badge that God gave him, in one sense, to say that he was the apostle of God's calling. It's funny enough that when the church in Acts first faced persecution, they likewise rejoice. There's that lovely instance in Acts in chapter 5 where we're told that Peter and John and some of the apostles were brought before the

Sanhedrin. And we're told that after they interviewed them, they beat them. They called the apostles in, we're told, and flogged them, then ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they'd been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name. So this is Paul again. He's suffering disgrace for the name. But it's a mark that he belongs to Jesus. And again, let me assure you, dear friends, that if as a Christian you are suffering, you are suffering either outwardly because of people being off with you or cold with you or difficult with you at work or at school, or because inwardly you're having those struggles and trials, rejoice with Paul in this. It's a mark that you're Christ's. It's a mark that you're the Lord's. One of the psalms that's of greatest encouragement to us, and somebody will tell me which psalm it is because I can't remember, is one where the psalmist says, my feet nearly slipped.

So I looked at the wicked, those without God. Their life seemed so easy. They seemed to have it all their own way with no problems. And I looked at my life, and it was really hard and tough. And I thought, this isn't fair. I'm paraphrasing, you understand, the psalm. Until I went into your house, Lord.

Until I went to your house. And dear friends, again, the reality is this, that if we suffer for Christ, it means we belong to Christ. If we struggle with prayer, it's because we belong to Christ. We find our hearts grieved because of those who reject the gospel, it's because we belong to Christ. If we find ourselves facing coldness within the family or within friendships or whatever it may be, it's because we belong to Christ. And therefore, there is rejoicing to be had. But that's not the end of Paul's rejoicing, I believe. That's not the only reason he rejoices. That's not what it was that gave to him great hope in the midst of these difficulties and trials. And we're brought back, really, in a certain way to where we were this morning. You see, for Paul, it was all worth it.

[19 : 40] It was all worth the suffering. It was all worth the hardship. It was all worth the affliction, so that he could fulfill the mission God had given him, which was to proclaim the gospel message in all its fullness. Verse 25, I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness. See, Paul considered the message of such wonderful quality and worth that any suffering he endured could not be held up in comparison to it.

Well, what was this message? What was so great and special about this message that Paul had to share and to take and to proclaim that cost him so much? What is the message that's been given to us as well, dear friends, which is so great that it's worth the opposition of friendships. It's worth the struggle inwardly. It's worth the nights of prayer. Well, what's so special? Well, three things. Two, very briefly, but one in particular. First of all, it was a secret message. He says, the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations. It was a message that had been hidden from human sight and knowledge. In fact, if you read Peter, Peter tells us even the angels didn't really understand the message as well. It wasn't just that the Old Testament saints didn't fully grasp it. But now Paul says this message which was hidden, this mystery, because when the New Testament uses the phrase mystery, it means something that was hidden but now is revealed.

Something that we didn't fully understand but now has come into blossom, into flower. And that's, of course, the whole message of the Bible. As we start at the beginning in Genesis, we have this unfolding revelation. We have the opening of the book of God's wonderful plan of salvation until we get into the New Testament and to Christ and we see it in all of its brightness.

It was a message that was hidden but now, says Paul, it's been, it was kept known but now it's been made known. Now it's disclosed to the saints. It's breaking news. It's something which the most exciting development in the history of the world since God met with Abraham. Christ has come.

For generations, it was a secret. Within the Israelite nation, now God has chosen that the Gentile world should hear it, that all nations should hear this wonderful message. So no doubt, no wonder he was excited. No wonder he felt it was worth it to bring this message to those who didn't know it before. And we realize that it was a very precious message, wasn't it? For he says there, to them, God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery.

[22 : 30] It's something valuable and precious. For by it, men and women are brought into the knowledge of the glorious riches of God. It's better than the news that you've won the lottery. Better than the news that your great auntie Gertie, who was a millionaire, has died and left you lots of money.

It's the greatest news of all, that there is an inheritance of treasures and riches beyond compare, which God has for you. It's a message of great worth. It's a precious message.

So it's precious, secret. But what is it? What is it? Isn't it wonderful how all the gospel can be summed up in four words? Probably summed up in less than that, but here Paul sums it up in four words. Oh, sorry, more than four words. Christ in you, the hope of glory. So that's seven words.

Christ in you, the hope of glory. Seven words. That's the whole gospel. That's the message that's been hidden for generations. That's the message that's burst out into the world. It's a message which is worth suffering for. It's the truth which is worth going through pain and hardship for. Christ in you, the hope of glory. If you read the letters of Paul, and of course I hope that you do read through the New Testament regularly, you'll find that Paul often describes a Christian as somebody who is in Christ. Right, the start of his letter here, he speaks and writes to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ. It's one of the great ways that Paul describes what has happened to us about being placed in Christ. But such is the union that we have between believer and Christ that we are both in him and he is also in us. And that's what Jesus said himself when he was speaking to his disciples in John 14 verse 20. He said to them, on that day, you will realize that I'm in my Father and you are in me and I'm in you. That's an impossible thing, isn't it? Either you're in something or something is inside you. You can't be in the same thing that's inside you, can you? But with Christ, of course, it's possible. We have such a close, such an intimate exchange of life between ourselves and Christ that we truly uniquely experience Christ in us and us in Christ. And this message, which is so great, is just that. You see, again, if we go back to the mystery, if we go back to what was hidden in the Old Testament, there was pictures of this, but it didn't really fully come into being. God was present with his people. He gave to Moses the directions about building the tabernacle. And it was that picture, that symbol, God in the midst of his people. When they camped as tribes, they all camped around the outside. God was in the midst of them, in the center of their camp. So they knew he was there. Whenever they opened their tents in the morning, there would be the tabernacle. There would be the assurance that God was with them.

Later on, of course, the temple was there in Jerusalem, the city. But of course, when the Lord Jesus came, the Bible tells us that he tabernacled with us. He dwelt with us. He was Emmanuel and is Emmanuel, God with us. God in person. God in human form. God in us and with us. But now, the Lord Jesus Christ has returned to the Father. And what has happened is this, that he promised his disciples, and therefore us too, that he would send his Holy Spirit. And it's by his Holy Spirit that Christ comes to dwell in us. Listen to those words again in John 14, just leading up to what we read a moment ago.

[26 : 22] I will ask the Father. He will give you another counselor to be with you forever. The Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. Do you see what Jesus is saying? The Holy Spirit will come and he will be in you. And because he will be in you, I will not leave you as an orphan. I will come to you. So by the Spirit of God indwelling us, we are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ. Paul, as he writes to the Christians in Rome, again reminds them of this truth. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, and every spiritual blessing that we have, we have because Christ is in us.

And we are in him. Ephesians 1.3, thanks be to God who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ, in the heavenly realms. But here, Paul is speaking about something else. He says, Christ in you, the hope of glory. It's not the end. It's not just the final thing. When Christ is in us, glorious and wonderful though it is that we have his presence dwelling with us, never to leave us, but it's the hope of glory. The greatest of these spiritual blessings is yet to be enjoyed.

We've just got the tip of the iceberg now. We've just got the beginning. It's only when we enter into glory that we shall know and experience all of the blessings, all of the riches, all of those glorious treasures of which he's been speaking. The indwelling of Christ within us is the evidence that glory is yet to come. It's the assurance that we are a people who live with hope. Not hopeless, but hopeful.

The hope of glory. Christ is in you, then glory is your future certainty. If Christ is in you, then you have that confidence that whatever goes on, you shall reach glory. And that's where the impact comes into suffering. That's when we begin to understand what Paul is saying and the rest of the Bible about suffering for Christ. About how it impacts us today as we suffer for him in living for him.

See, it enables us to put our sufferings in their rightful place. Enables us to view those sufferings for what they really are. Here's how Paul describes them in 2 Corinthians and chapter 4.

[29 : 10] Our light and momentary troubles. See how he views them. This is Paul who was stoned, beaten with rods, shipwrecked, naked, hungry. These sort of things happen to you? But those are the things he calls light and momentary troubles. He was able to see them for what they really were. See them because he saw them in comparison to the glory that was yet to come. Saw them for what they really were.

We aren't at that time of the year yet, but there's going to come that time of the year, isn't there, where the sun goes very low in the sky. And you look at your shadow or the shadow of something else and it's huge, isn't it? It seems so long.

A little hill can seem like a great mountain, can't it, when the sun is very low. But actually when you put that in its rightful place alongside a real mountain, that hill just looks like a molehill. It's not really as terrible or as huge and immense as it felt at the time.

And dear friends, without wishing to patronize or belittle the sufferings that each of you endure as a Christian, some of those sufferings can seem so huge and immense, they can seem overwhelming.

But when we put them in comparison to the glory, the mountain of treasures and blessings that are ours in Christ, then we see them as they really are. They're just light and momentary.

[30 : 44] They're passing, they're for a time, yes a painful time, a time of real sorrow and grief. But dear friends, in the midst of that sorrow and grief, we can rejoice, not because the sufferings give us joy, but the sufferings remind us of something yet, which is greater and more real and more lasting, the hope of glory.

Glory. I just want to close with these words of a hymn. I hoped that we'd have it in our hymn book, but we don't. Some of you will know the words though.

When all my labours and trials are over, and I'm safe on that beautiful shore, just to be near the dear Lord I adore, will through the ages be glory for me.

Oh, that will be glory for me. Glory for me. Glory for me. When by his grace I shall look on his face, that will be glory. Be glory for me.

Well, let's sing together our closing hymn, shall we? It's in Christ alone my hope is found. 6, 4, 7.

[31 : 55] 7, 5, 7. 7, 7.

8, 9, 9, 10. 8, 9, 10. 9, 10. 9, 10. 10, 11. 11, 11.

11, 12. 12, 13. 12, 13. 13. 14, 13. 14, 13. 14, 14. 14, 15, Lisa, 1.

14, 15, Lisa, we goend for grace or service or pure belief. 15, Lisa, we assist.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

[33 : 00] My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

[34 : 36] My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand.

My comfort are my only Lord, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. My love, here in the mouth of Christ I stand. with of his hand till he resists of those he hold here in the path of Christ in thy stand the God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory in Christ after you have suffered a little while will himself restore you and make you strong firm and steadfast to him be the power and the glory forever and ever Amen