

The Afflictions of Christ

Colossians 1:24-29

Introduction

Paul did not found the church at Colosse nor had he visited it at the time of this epistle (Col. 2:1), but this does not prevent him from ministering to and suffering on behalf of the church. He writes during one of his imprisonments (Ephesus—2 Cor. 1:8ff, Caesarea—Acts 24:27, Rome—Acts 28:16ff) to assure the Colossians they are, now, citizens of heaven. He wants them to come to full maturity, to have knowledge, wisdom and understanding so that they would walk worthy and be fruitful (1:10), to have the same blessings in their ministry as Paul had in his. And what was Paul's ministry like? This passage gives us a unique glimpse into Paul's sufferings, how they identify with Christ's, and therefore how ours do as well.

Overview

He rejoices in his sufferings, not because he loves pain, but because he loves the church (v24). Paul's troubles pick up where Jesus' left off, and though certainly they are not atoning afflictions, nonetheless they are necessary for the health of the church (v24). This calling of stewardship to make the word of God fully known was given to Paul by God himself, the mystery hidden for ages from God's people that the Gospel would affect an enormous salvation among the Gentiles (vv25-27). This mystery is exhibited right in pagan Colosse as Christ in them (the church), the hope of glory (v27). Paul proclaimed, warned, and taught everyone, everyone, everyone, in order that they would be mature in Christ (v28). Like a dedicated athlete, Paul fought for this goal with everything God supplied him (v29).

Christ Still Suffering?

The Pauline philosophy of ministry is not what anyone would come up, certainly no Protestant aware of the idolatries of transubstantiation or open theism. Suffering on behalf of others is common in Paul's writings (2 Cor. 1:6; Eph. 3:13; 2 Tim. 2:10), but here it is uniquely tied to Christ (v24). The word used here for "afflictions" never refers to the cross, the atoning death of Jesus but it does indicate that Paul lives in the way of the cross and works out what God fundamentally accomplished on the cross.

Christians are heirs of God if they suffer with Christ (Rom. 8:17). We can understand how Christ continues to suffer in at least three ways. First, corporate Christology sees the whole Christ, head and body, bridegroom and bride, Jesus connected to the church, and that which is true of him is true of his people. Second, the kingdom has arrived but is still coming and growing, and like all growth, there is pain (Rom. 8:22). The new creation groans including us and the Spirit (Rom. 8:23), and Jesus was the firstborn of this new creation. The "not yet" of our salvation isn't simply a struggle we watch, it's one we participate in, and we do it united to the Savior. Jesus freely chose to suffer and so do we as we imitate his sacrificial life both before the cross and after. Paul could never add to the achievement of the cross, but he sees the calling of the church to be like Christ in both the means and the end. Paul does not hope to save the Colossians from their sin since that has already been done, but he does hope to suffer on their behalf and teach them to imitate Jesus this same way for others.

Filling up the Afflictions of Christ

It is obvious that we don't suffer the same ways that Paul did and this is good perspective. But it's still true that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Jesus will suffer, if not outwardly with persecution, job loss, hatred and scorn, then inwardly with doubts, sickness, temptation, stress over family and vocational responsibilities. We ought to be encouraged by this passage and not waste our suffering. Jesus made us, that Gentile treasure chest, through his suffering (v27). And Paul sought to polish the jewels with all his might (vv28-29). We are never more like Jesus when sacrificing on his behalf.