

The Mystery of Union with Christ Revealed

Colossians 1:24-27

I. The afflictions of Christ and our union with Him (vv. 24–25). “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God.*”

Paul saw his imprisonment as benefitting the church (“poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith,” Phil. 2:17, “the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance,” 2 Cor. 1:5; “I will most gladly be spent and expended for your souls,” 2 Cor 12:15). Paul’s present imprisonment meant he was experiencing the persecution intended for Christ. In spite of His death on the cross, Christ’s enemies had not gotten their fill on inflicting injury on Him. So they turned their hatred on those who preached the gospel. It was in that sense that Paul filled up what was lacking in Christ’s afflictions. He saw his life as an offering to God on behalf of the church. This is part of the Good News we don’t like (“blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,” Mt. 5:10; “we exult in our tribulations—proven character and hope,” Rom. 5:3; “suffer with Him that we may be glorified with Him,” Rom 8:17. “For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear *to be in me,*” Phil. 1:29-30. “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” 2 Tim 3:12). As Jesus suffered on behalf of others, so must His followers. Only the Spirit can turn persecution into joy (redeeming it)!

Paul says something that is generally misunderstood when he uses the phrase ‘my sufferings for you’(v. 24). Notice that he quickly links this with ‘the afflictions of Christ’ in the same verse. Participating in the sufferings of Christ is a spiritual experience which is born out of the believer’s ***union with Christ***. Paul is one of a great army of believers who, having taken up their cross and followed Jesus, and by suffering, contribute to the growth of the church worldwide. Christ suffered in death to save the church, and Paul is suffering in life to help the churches. Paul can add nothing to the redemptive work of Christ; there is no sacrificial act of atonement suggested here, rather a participation in the reproach of the Savior which Paul faced as God’s messenger (**Heb 13:13**). The statement, “To fulfill the Word of God” refers the Paul’s single-minded devotion to completely fulfill the ministry God gave him to preach the whole counsel of God to those to whom God sent him.

II. The mystery of our union with Christ revealed (vv. 26–27) “that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

The ‘mystery’ Paul speaks about is not ‘something paradoxical or puzzling, but a truth revealed now that Messiah has died and risen. This mystery refers to truth hidden until now, but revealed for the first time to the saints of the New Testament. Such truth includes the mystery of the incarnate God, unity of Jew and Gentile made one in the church, and the indwelling Spirit of Christ. The ‘deceivers’ in Colossae were accustomed to using words like ‘mystery’. Paul is counteracting this because there are no secrets now. The Messiah has come and there are no secret societies, or cults which have more divine light than the gospel Paul preaches. The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals the whole picture to all who will listen and believe. Here are four things about the mystery: The ‘mystery’ is the content of Paul’s preaching ministry, ‘hidden from ages and from generations, but now ... revealed to his saints (v. 26). The ‘mystery’ has two elements that climax in Christ himself. (1) The Gentiles are now included in the plan of God (v. 27). This was new and it created a problem for established Judaism. (2) The ‘mystery’ is actually a person who is ‘Christ in you’ (v. 27b).

The phrase ‘Christ in you’ speaks of the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ in the believer’s heart in the Person of the Holy Spirit. This leads to love, joy and peace. The phrase ‘the hope of glory’ refers to eternal life. Christ possessed within (‘Christ in you’) *is* eternal life. This ‘hope’ is always looking forward to the future resurrection and the fulfilment of God’s promises in the Scriptures. The Old Testament predicted the coming of Messiah and that the Gentiles would partake of salvation, but the O.T. did not reveal that the Messiah would actually live in each member of His redeemed church, made up mostly of Gentiles. Believers both Jew and Gentile, now possess the surpassing riches of the indwelling Christ. That is the glorious revealed mystery (**Rom 16:25-26; 2 Tim 1:9-10**). The indwelling Spirit of Christ is the guarantee to each believer of future glory (**Eph 1:13-14; Rom 8:11**) (MacArthur).

III. The riches of our union with Christ reckoned (Col 1:27). Notice that spiritual maturity is characterized by a completeness in Christ (Col 1:29; 2:10).

Realizing this completeness means living upon the life of Another, upon Christ.

Ephesians chapter 4 describes the maturity process as: “But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Eph 4:15-16).

Christ, the Head, enlivens, invigorates and energizes all parts of His body the

church. That's a reality which defines our triumph and liberty. But, most believers are privately feeling spiritually defeated and dry. Thus, when they hear biblical commands, which call them to greater obedience, they tend to hear them through a filter that says, "You are not doing enough," "You are not trying hard enough," "You deserve condemnation." This exacerbates the cycle of feeling defeated and dry. Now true, we must pay close attention to commands of Scripture, but you won't be able to dig yourself out of a hole of condemnation by merely trying harder. Victory starts with God's enabling grace through union with Christ.

Thus, let us consider further our heartening theme of union with Christ.

That union began when God made the match, radically identifying us with Christ at the moment of salvation—having worked saving faith in us through the Spirit's regenerating work. It is by this living union with Christ, a union that is organic and unbreakable that we live unto God. By this union, all the benefits of Christ's Person and work have become the believer's (rightful) possession.

This is a positional truth, though unchanging, it is appropriated and experienced by faith (vigorous—a 'fight of faith'). As Irwin Lutzer has said in his landmark book, "You are richer than you think." There are many biblical commands that we could designate, 'the one-another's'. But, what if you found out that the love, encouragement, nurture, and edification you are to give to your fellow brethren is not something you generate by yourself, but it is the overflow of joy that takes place when you commune with Christ. Joyful Christians serve! *Union > Joy > Service.*

But, our habit is to survey the landscape of our own Christian life and conclude hard things against ourselves. That's our tendency to let our thoughts settle onto the extensiveness of our shortcomings. Then, in a knee jerk response, we return to a self-assessment of spiritual defeat and deadness. Answer: it takes a work of grace through the Spirit to regularly reckon one's completeness as being found in Christ (**Col 2:10**). It's a very counter-intuitive thing to do to draw soul-ravishing comfort from the truths of the union with Christ. In fact, this entire reality of God's unmerited grace and love—'deeded to us' is foreign to our natural earthly experience—namely that the God of the universe should pour out endless favor and blessing upon me because of the life/performance of Another, Christ, my Substitute.

We really ought to look at the 'how to' of reckoning our union with Christ.

What does it mean to reckon or practice receiving the rich comfort that comes from union with Christ? ***First***, it is a spiritual discipline, to regularly venture upon that truth that the Father has radically identified us with His Son (**Rom 6:3-9**). What is it about this glorious truth that causes our hearts to choose doubt instead of trust? Could it be that we prefer Law to grace; we would rather have a hand in gaining God's favor than in receiving it out of divine pity and compassion.

Second, admit it, yes, it is true, in my carnal reasoning, I feel that I am more

secure if I have a hand in providing my security. Our faith in the gospel is often weak, evidenced by the fact that we tire being an object of God's pity; a charity case. For, as soon as we do anything of value in our Christian life, we turn it into merit and try to *print heavenly money with it*—as if we could purchase a little part of our divine favor and acceptance. **EX.** Nearly every man I have disciplined, admits that his Christian life fell into a rut because he was practicing a system of heavenly brownie points.

My friends, reckoning your union with Christ, is the only way out of performance Christianity. God is easy to please, but impossible to satisfy. The satisfaction was accomplished by the work of His Son on our behalf. Honesty is useful here—let's be ruthlessly honest, there is some fear and trepidation in being loved for no good reason in yourself. It is humbling and scary. What does the holy God of the universe see in me? If I try to find something, it is a hopeless search. I will have no peace until I look at my Savior instead of at myself. **EX.** My wife and I talk about how consenting to receive this divine love normally makes us shed tears. I can't receive this love without getting choked up.

Third, union with Christ reckoned is about matching Christ's fitness with our unfitness (because that is what the Father did when He saved us). Can you imagine a church more dead than Laodicea? Yet, Christ invites them to have intimate fellowship with Him, to sup with Him at the points of their spiritual poverty. Think of it! Christ is telling them that every area of their life that is spiritually bankrupt, Christ will answer by His all sufficient riches. Thus, receiving the wealth of the Son of God in each of these areas as a bankrupt 'beggar' is the basis of fellowship.

I want you to see that this glorious truth of union with Christ is the unfolding of the Father's purpose that Christ should have first place in everything (Col 1:18). The Son having 'first place' or preeminence in everything is about Christ entirely spanning the infinite gap between Holy God and dying sinner. To do so, He had to enter our existential situation: born of woman, born under the law, born weakened under the curse, born mortal (capable of dying).

We are indebted to Puritans and Reformers because they urged us to behold Christ and meditate upon Him from the perspective of union with Him. Only the reckoning of union with Christ can take us off of ourselves; we all know how deadening it is to be self-focused. But, our 'default' thought life tends to be disillusionment with ourselves in which we reason; *since I am disappointed and disgusted with myself, a perfect Christ in heaven surely feels the same way about me.* This kind of thinking gets us into a spiritual desert. And the way out is beholding the Lord from the vantage point of union with Him. That means that the gloriousness of my Savior and answers every paltry area of my spiritual life.

Fourth, The spiritual discipline of reckoning union with Christ is how we fight for joy. How could Paul rejoice in his sufferings? (Col 1:24). Did he know

something that we neglect or do not know? He certainly knew **Nehemiah 8:10**, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” We would gain strength if we could identify the ‘joy-killers’ in our walk and steer clear of them. A ‘joy killer’ is that we look within far more than we look to Christ. That keeps us from the practice of reckoning our union with Christ. We tend to listen to ourselves all day long, wasting volumes of emotional energy fighting against a sense of condemnation. No wonder the Scripture commands us diligently labor to enter this Sabbath rest that is Christ! “Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through *following* the same example of disobedience” (Heb 4:11) (“Let us labor therefore to enter. . .” (KJV).

John Owen in his Hebrews commentary on that Hebrews 4 text says of this rest in Christ, The Apostle exhorts them to enter into the whole rest of God in the gospel. We are to labor, to diligently study—to endeavor to enter that rest. Observe that great oppositions will arise against the work of entering into God’s rest, substantial obstacles will seek to block gospel faith and obedience. Notwithstanding all these difficulties, the promise of God, mixed with our faith will carry us safely through them all. The utmost of our endeavor and labors are required in order to obtain an entrance into the rest of Christ. The rest of the gospel deserves our utmost diligence and endeavor. To convince men of this is one of the chief ends of preaching the gospel. Thus, (in this text) there is a present excellency in, and a present reward attending gospel faith and obedience. For, they give us present entrance into the rest of Christ, and are the means of entering into the future eternal rest with God (see also on faith, diligence, and perseverance, (see also, “Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it,” Heb 4:1. “And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Heb 6:11-12).

Will some of you today take steps in this direction to begin reckoning that the same God and Father who placed you in Christ, now contemplates you in Christ? His verdict is the only verdict that counts. If we discount His verdict, we will wind up doing the devil’s work for free, that is listening the accuser while ignoring the Father’s verdict. Would we cut off our nose to spite ourselves? That’s what we are doing when we do not fight for joy and only listen to ourselves. Joy cannot be pursued directly. It is the byproduct of prizing Christ, seeking ever grander visions of Christ, and presenting ourselves to Him in obedience as a living sacrifice.

We spend so much energy warding off a sense of judgment, pretending we are not broken, pretending we have it altogether. If we took just ten percent of that energy and started meditating union with Christ, studying Scripture with the goal of believing and obeying it, our spiritual life would change (toward ‘gospel rest’). Paul pleaded in prayer that His converts might receive “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in

the knowledge of Christ” (Eph 1:17). For, He knew God’s Word received in the prison Epistles, would experience a quantum leap in their walk and worship if they began to comprehend their union with Christ.

Perhaps in the past you have regarded union with Christ as belonging to an ethereal, upper story, ‘pie in the sky’ set of promises. You content yourself that Christ is Lord of heavenly things, but you do not perceive Christ’s intimate involvement in the details of your life, thoughts, and conscience. How do we bring these truths of union with Christ into everyday life? Well I will put it this way. The truths of union with Christ, our source Person have the ability to shape all of your motives. If by faith, you are convinced that Christ carries your standing, acceptance, favor, love, adoption and belonging with God, then you will not try to carry these things yourself by your performance. And that will change every motive in your life.

The New Testament order is radically different from the Old. We rest in order to work. We rest in Christ so that all our motives come from gratitude. When was the last time you were thrilled to read of the spiritual blessings that belong to Christians described in **Ephesians chapters 1-3**? These blessings belong to the believer because of living, organic, union with Christ who purchased them for you. Joy is the byproduct of reckoning union with Christ. It is the result of aggressive, vigilant believing and spiritual seeing—reckoning what is true, but often what you do not feel. “Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13). Joy gives glory to God, and joy produces resolve, joy is the strength to fight the fight of faith with endurance. “Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Tim 6:12).

EX. I received a call from a church member up north where I had ministered in the Central Coast. She was calling to order discipleship books. She said something profound in terms of her vision for discipleship among women, “It is not possible to suffer well by yourself. The women I am training in discipleship are learning that we need to be with other growing believers who are able to speak into our lives.” This reminds me of a saying, “Attitudes are contagious, is yours worth catching?” Will the grace of God shine through you to others amidst your suffering? Paul says it best in **Philippians 2:14-16.** “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.” Those who fight for joy are shining as lights, their lives are saying, I am supported by Christ, I am not barely hanging by a thread, my Savior who supports me is a continent of rock.

Reckoning our union with Christ is a vital spiritual discipline indispensable

for growth and stability. This blessed spiritual duty involves exhibiting the glory and sufficiency of Christ to the eyes of the heart (**Eph 1:18ff.**). **EX.** In our fallen world, men tend to be preoccupied with their inadequacy and women with their blemishes. So men do things to feel adequate and women do things to cover their blemishes. It is fascinating that the gospel addresses both our inadequacy and our blemishes. Christ covers us with His righteousness. “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27). And He provides the adequacy that we cannot provide. “Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:4-6). Christ in you, the hope of glory, is a future glory in which we will not have spot (blemish) or wrinkle, but will be holy and blameless before Him in love (**Eph 5:27**).

Our old habits of just listening to ourselves instead of preaching to ourselves, are like a rut cut deeply by erosion. As soon as it rains, all the thoughts, flow in that groove, or channel. Reckoning our union with Christ will be a new habit for many of you—it will involve cutting a new channel for your thoughts to flow/travel in. In that new groove of thinking, you will find that joy fills your soul as you reckon, and meditate on union with Christ.

Charles Spurgeon preached a remarkable sermon on victory in spiritual warfare, the title was, “The blood of Christ, our conquering weapon.” It is based upon Revelation 12:11 in which believers during the 7-year tribulation period overcame the devil by the blood of the Lamb. Spurgeon states that in order are to overcome the evil one (the *accuser*), you must first overcome him in the realm of the heavenlies. In other words, you must actively reckon the fact that Christ is your Advocate, your Great High Priest who is pleading the merits of His blood on your behalf—and His doing so, He is silencing every accusation made against you by the devil. By faith in His Word, which gives spiritual sight, we behold our glorious Man in glory representing us and defending us.

You might say, that sounds like an effective strategy, but doesn’t the Holy Spirit bring our sins to mind? How can we know when it is the Spirit showing us our sin that we need to repent of and confess, and how do we know when it is the devil accusing us? Answer: the evil one wants to produce despondency, depression, exasperation, quitting. So when he brings your personal sin to mind he does so to crush, dishearten, and weigh down the believer. But, when the Spirit brings personal sin to mind, He is always solution-oriented. He will never tire of pointing you to the blood. He will move you to repentance and confession (**1 Jn 1:9**).

It is tragic that Darwinism (evolution) is being taught to our children in school as if that flawed theory were the nature of reality. What we often miss is that

this worldview is teaching our kids that life is meaningless. For in Darwinism, the weak and unfit die so the strong can reproduce themselves. **EX.** Chinese couple in Thailand, (“our chromosomes found each other.” The bloodiest dictators in the last 100 years justified their atrocities by the theory of evolution.

So what a horrific step backwards this was for Western civilization to start teaching this godless theory. Bear in mind, that when the gospel first came to Europe, the news of Christ’s descent (incarnation), was the basis for man’s ascent in dignity and value. Prior to the gospel, fathers in the Roman Empire regularly killed their sons if they were unable to stand up on their own by the age of two. Countless disabled children were commonly made sex slaves or rowing slaves. Only the gospel changed this. But, now in the 21st Century, our children are being taught all over again that human beings have no innate value. How different the gospel is from Darwinism. For in the gospel the trajectory of life is the opposite of evolution! In the gospel, the most fit Being in the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ, dies for the unfit! He was given by the Father to give life to believing sinners and thus to bring them to God. This endless life is transmitted to us through union with Christ.