



~Script: Pastor Frank Johnson~

Colossians: Shaped by the Truth of Jesus

“What Serving Christ and His Church Involves, Part I”

Colossians 1:24-29

~Take a first look~

I. A past issue of *Glimpses*, the bulletin insert we purchase for everyone from Christian History Institute, told the story of Eric Liddell. Most of us remember him because of the movie *Chariots of Fire*. The movie followed the careers of Eric and other star runners from Great Britain as they prepared for the Summer Olympic Games of 1924. Eric had grown up as the son of missionaries to China. He and his brother Rob had been great athletes at the Missionary Boarding School they attended as children and youth back in London. Then, when Eric moved to the University of Edinburgh, he was encouraged by a friend to turn out for sports.

The *Glimpses* insert revealed that even though Eric was a gifted runner, he also had God's call upon his life to return to China as a missionary. He wanted to be a science teacher in the Chinese-Anglo school and to work with his father in sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. He worked hard at his studies. His older brother Rob was a better student, so Eric had to try harder in that realm. At first, when approached to try out for running competitions at the University of Edinburgh, he wondered if it might be a detour from his sense of calling. He asked his mother's advice. Her answer went something like this: "You won't go to China for a few years, Eric. And how long can you run like this? I believe the answer is the same: a few years. Perhaps this is God's plan. To run now, and to give God all the glory for your gift."¹ This was all he needed. He began to train hard. He ran and won race after race in the 100-yard, the 220-yard and the 440-yard sprints.

In 1923, as runners all over the world were preparing for the possibility of competing in the Summer Olympics, Eric's brother Rob was on a team of students trying to reach the men of Great Britain for Christ. They were going from town to town, holding 3-5 evangelistic meetings over as many days. One of the other students on the team thought that what they needed was someone with a name to draw the men away from the taverns and the cinema. Ah, the appeal of *celebrity* has been with us for a long time! One of them suggested Rob's brother, Eric. When approached, Eric agreed. He spoke fearfully but simply to that gathering of 80 men of His trust in Christ and of the difference it made in his life. This became the first of many such meetings over the next couple of years leading up to the Olympics in 1924 and thereafter. Eric came to see this opportunity as one of God's purposes for giving him the gift of *speed* on the track.

And you all probably know the rest of the story. Eric did compete in the Olympic Games in 1924, becoming the first Scottish athlete to win gold at the games in the 400 meters. This is the point in the story where the brief account in *Glimpses* began. One year later, Eric returned to China to "run with perseverance the race marked out" for him there as a servant of God (see Hebrews 12:2). He served faithfully right into the middle of World War II and the conflict between Japan and China. He was interred along with other foreigners in the Weihsien Internment Camp in March of 1943. It was while there that he began to report debilitating headaches. Soon, he collapsed in the hospital at the camp. In February of 1945, just months before the August bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan and the resulting end of fighting in China, as well, Eric died from a cerebral hemorrhage. He was 43 years of age. He left his wife and two daughters who were in Canada at the mission's insistence. His third daughter was born after they had left for Canada. Eric never saw her or held her in his arms.

¹ Ellen Caughey, *Eric Liddell: Olympian and Missionary* (Barbour, 2000), p. 52.

II. Why would a man with such natural talent leave it all at the peak of his success only to die in relative obscurity? Why would he leave the parades and the national—even international—acclaim to serve God in the remote provinces of a foreign country? Put simply: because he knew that he was serving the only One Whose recognition lasted forever.

III. The Apostle Paul shared such a conviction. He knew what it meant to leave behind the status that is granted to few human beings for a humble life of service to God. He shares with a little church in Asia Minor that he had never visited his sense of calling to serve Christ and His Church. This is what it always involves to offer ourselves in service to God. This is not a service only for professionals; we have a universal calling to serve Christ and His Church.

Colossians 1:24-29

~Take a closer look~

SERVING CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH INVOLVES ...

I. Suffering for a purpose

1. For Christ: Paul says that he is suffering in order to “fill up what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions.” What in the world could he have meant by such a statement? There have been some who have suggested that Christ’s suffering on the cross was only partially able to save His people and that His people themselves needed to add something to it of their own. This must be fully rejected because of the very meaning of the cross of Christ. The book of Hebrews makes the thorough case that Jesus’ suffering on the cross was the final and complete sacrifice for the sins of the world. Nothing further could be added by anyone or anything to make this complete. Rather, we should understand Paul as saying that since we are taken up into Christ’s very life when we become His followers, what happens to us as His followers happens to Him. We never really suffer affliction on our own. Christ is always present in us by His Spirit. In this sense, Paul is saying, our present suffering is the ongoing suffering of our Lord Jesus. This suffering is not necessary for our salvation, but it is a direct result of being “in Christ.” In essence, Christ not only *suffered for* His people, He *is still suffering in* His people.

And this is also suffering ...

2. For His Church: He says that he does this “for the sake of His body, which is the Church.” When the Body of Christ suffers, Christ Himself suffers. When anyone suffers as a servant of Christ, it is ultimately “for His body, which is the Church.” Again, these comments are meant to be a simple extension of what it means to be “in Christ.” As “the *body of Christ*,” *the Church is the visible expression of the presence of Jesus in the world*. Anything done for the Church is done for Christ. Anything truly done for Christ will ultimately be for the benefit of His Church. And such service for Christ and the Church draws the servant up into the afflictions of Christ Himself.

A—With Paul, we must also say, anyone who truly desires to serve Christ and His Church will face some form of suffering along the way. We can rejoice in these afflictions because they are signs that the old epoch is losing the fight and will ultimately have to yield to the age that will come to its fulfillment at the return of the True King, Jesus Christ.

I—This is why Paul compares our present suffering with labor pains (see chapter 8 of Romans). The suffering is serious, but it is the pain of impending life, not of impending death.

This may include something as serious and life-threatening as being confined in an internment camp just as it was with Eric Liddell in China. It may be something as difficult as being thrown into prison with no “due process” to help you, as it was with the Apostle Paul while he wrote these words. It has been this way with many others through the centuries. It may be legal action that comes because you decline to prepare flowers or bake a cake for the wedding of a same-sex couple. It may be taking the criticism and complaints of other Christians for what we are doing in service to Christ. Clearly, as we can see from several of Paul’s letters (notably Galatians and the Corinthian correspondence), Paul was belittled and berated by other Christians sometimes, both behind his back and to his face, which left him discouraged and defensive.

The afflictions that we face as followers of Jesus Christ may be criticism coming from our fellow-citizens, such as that brought against Eric Liddell when he refused to run on Sunday. Whatever we might think about this view of the Lord’s Day, we cannot fault Liddell from holding his convictions regardless of the feelings or statements of others. We might have to suffer more than inconvenience when we politely refuse to take part in wild parties with our workmates or school friends, or when we refuse to get involved sexually with anyone outside of a committed heterosexual marriage. So what will they call us? Prudes? Bigots? *Puritans*? (not really such a slam, if you know any real history of their movement). “In fact,” as Paul writes to Timothy, his junior partner in ministry, “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted . . .” (2 Timothy 3:12, NIV). Such affliction brought on by those opposed to Christ will be expressed toward those who belong to Him.

But this is the worst-case scenario. Let me just say, if we really offer ourselves to serve Christ and His Church, it will cost us something. We must be ready to rise to the task, to endure the inconveniences that are involved, to give ourselves to it, knowing that Christ is with us in all of it. He will reward those who have entered into His very sufferings.

SERVING CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH INVOLVES, well ...

II. Serving ... (not to put too fine a point on it. 😊)

1. God—Paul was serving “by the commission God gave me” (1:25). What better reason for serving Christ and His Church? Paul was called to serve by the very King of kings and Lord of lords. What a privilege! What a calling! Paul again uses the word δίακονος (*diakonos*) to describe himself. This is the word from which our word *deacon* comes. It was used often to denote a table-server, like a server in a modern restaurant. This is how Paul describes himself here. He is given the Good News of Jesus from God to serve to the people.

And so he also serves ...

2. The Church (and in his case, “the Gentiles”)—His calling was “to present to you the word of God in its fullness.” More literally, he says, “in order to *fulfill* the word of God.” This message is not fulfilled until all have heard. Paul saw himself as an important link in the fulfillment of that message. He was sent out to “the Gentiles” with the commission to tell the Good News of “the word of God.” As more and more heard, it was more and more fulfilled.

And the message Paul brought centered on ...

3. The “Mystery” of the word of God—“which is,” says Paul, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Let’s press that restaurant analogy a bit, shall we? God is the Owner of the spiritual restaurant. Paul is the server who works for Him. The Church and the world are the patrons of

the restaurant. The word of God is the menu, and the main course is “the mystery,” once hidden but now unveiled and revealed to the entire world, “which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Probably Paul is *not* borrowing ideas from the pagan mystery-cults of his time and later. More likely, given the Jewish overtones of this letter, he is referring to the cycle of prophecy and fulfillment, the foretelling in symbols and in analogies of the coming of the Savior, the Anointed One—*Messiah* in Hebrew, *Christ* in Greek. To tie this in with the phrase Paul uses here, “the word of God,” the beginning of the book of Hebrews is helpful:

^{FJV}**Hebrews 1:1-4:** (1) *In various parts and in various ways in the past after God spoke to the fathers by the prophets, (2) in the last of these days He has spoken to us by a Son, Whom He appointed heir of all things, through Whom also He made the ages/worlds; (3) Who being the radiance of the Glory and exact representation of His being, and upholding all things by His powerful word, having provided cleansing from sins, He sat down at the right hand of the majesty in the highest places, (4) having become by so much better than the angels, He inherited a name so much more excellent than they.*

Did you catch it? “In the past ... *God spoke* to the fathers by the prophets ...; in the last of these days *He has spoken* to us by a Son.” This is why John calls Jesus “the Word” in the prologue to John’s Gospel. He is the Logos, the clearest message from God that we will get this side of the Resurrection in glory. What was veiled in the past has been made known and clear in Jesus Christ. The One Who had been foreshadowed in the revelation of the Old Covenant was now present: “Christ *in* you” can be understood as “Christ *among* you,” since the “you” is plural. But more to Paul’s emphasis of the coming of Christ is that He is *present* in His Church. He is the animating principle of “His *body*, which is the Church.”

A—So if we are to follow this pattern, we can draw these three applications: (1) If we serve as Christians, we serve God; (2) If we serve God, we serve His Church; (3) If we serve God by serving His Church, the most important thing to focus on is Jesus Christ. Not every aspect of serving is proclamation, but every aspect of serving should be tied into and support the proclamation of Christ. *The body of Christ exists to glorify Christ.*

I—So whether we are handing out bulletins at the door, serving soup at the potluck dinner, meeting with a ministry team to plan some activity, visiting the sick and infirmed, cleaning the floors or the toilets, emptying trash from the classrooms, or counseling the disturbed, everything we do must be to serve the greater purpose of proclaiming Christ.

As Francis of Assisi has been quoted, “Preach always; when necessary, use words.” All that we do must be a proclamation of Christ, done with the Good News of Jesus Christ in view, serving “as for the Lord.”

SERVING CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH INVOLVES ...

III. Struggling toward a goal

1. Paul was struggling toward the goal of proclaiming Christ. Our message as the Church which belongs to Jesus Christ is not ourselves; it is Christ!

I—Graeme Keith, treasurer of the Billy Graham Association and Billy’s lifelong friend, says: “I was on an elevator with Billy [Graham] when another man in the elevator recognized him. He said, ‘You’re Billy Graham, aren’t you?’

“‘Yes,’ Billy said.

“‘Well,’ the man said, ‘you are truly a great man.’

“Billy immediately responded, ‘No, I’m not a great man. I just have a great message.’”²
It was this same message that Paul had; it is the same message that is the hallmark of the true Church of Jesus throughout the ages: the Good News of Jesus Christ Himself.

A—We must remember this always. *The message of the Church is not the Church. The message of the Church is Jesus Christ*, as He is revealed to us through the Sacred writings of the Bible.

I—I reminded us all several years ago, as we prepared to build a new worship center, we must not forget this. As Paul said it elsewhere, “*We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake*” (2 Corinthians 4:5, NIV). We do not proclaim the Good News of our great worship center. We celebrate what God has done in providing such a blessing to us both now and for the future of this church’s ministry, but it is not the focus of our proclamation. It will continue to exist to *facilitate* our proclamation of Christ and to give us a place from which we can help everyone who hears and responds to that message to grow up in Him. Indeed, this is also a part of the goal.

2. Paul was struggling toward the goal of presenting everyone mature in Him—He did this through “admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom.” The ministry of the Church is not complete until every follower of Jesus Christ has reached full maturity. The word translated “perfect” in verse 28 has to do with “attaining an end or purpose, complete.” Understood morally, this sounds very similar to what Paul has just said about Christ (v. 22). The reconciling power of Christ is so that He might present His people “holy and unblemished and blameless before Him.” Paul wants to join with Christ in this work. And he does so in two ways:

a. *Admonishing.* The main thrust of this work is warning people of the dangers of being unholy, blemished and under the accusing gaze of God—that is, the dangers of not being “in Christ.”

b. *Teaching.* The main thrust of this aspect of Christian ministry is to impart and impress on Jesus’ followers “all the wisdom” that Christ has revealed through His “apostles and prophets” in the writings of our New Testament. Helping in both *understanding* and *application* is what teaching is all about.

A—This is why everything we do together on the Lord’s Day is drawn from the Scriptures, as understood in light of the coming of Jesus Christ.

I—We do not read the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, only as Jewish persons might read it prior to the coming of the Christ. We read them in the light of His coming. “A *Savior* has been born to you,” said the angel to the shepherds, “who is *Christ*, the *Lord*.” This is why we celebrate Christmas! This is “the reason for the season.” All three of those descriptive titles in the angel’s announcement are important: (1) *Savior*. He has come “to save His people from their sins.” (2) *Christ*. He is the Anointed One, the Prophet, Priest and King Who was promised. (3) *Lord*. He is Emmanuel, “God with us.” We owe Him the reverence and worship that only a divine being should receive.

The New Testament becomes the lens through which we interpret the Old Testament, and not the other way around. We can no longer see the struggle of ancient

² Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley, *The Leadership Secrets of Billy Graham* (Zondervan, 2005).

Israel the same way. We see it moving toward an ultimate climax in the birth of this little baby who would grow up to be the Savior, Christ, the Lord!

Our task in Christian service is to warn people of the peril of “neglecting so great a salvation” (Hebrew 2) and to teach them what it means for their past, their present lives and their future.

3. Paul was not struggling on his own, but rather was empowered by God—He struggled “with all His energy, which so powerfully works in me.” Here is the paradox of the Christian life. We find our lives by losing them. We are strongest when we are weak. We live through dying. We struggle, but the power that comes to us is not our own; it is the power of God in Christ.

A—So are we serving with all His power or are we just struggling on our own?
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I—After Eric Liddell won the gold in the 400 meters in Paris in the 1924 Olympics, he was quoted in the newspapers with this simple statement: “The secret of my success over the 400 meters is that I run the first 200 meters as hard as I can. Then, for the second 200 meters, with God’s help, I run harder.”³ Of course, the truth he really was getting at is simply that the entire race was run “with God’s help.”

Let’s face it, the Christian life is impossible without the presence and power of God at work within us, both as individuals and as the Church. As Jesus said, “*I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing*” (John 15:5, NIV). You must understand that last statement in light of the analogy of vine and branches. The branch can do some things apart from the vine. It can become dry and brittle and easily broken. It can wither up and die. It can be easily set on fire to wreak havoc with other branches. But one thing it can never do on its own. *Apart from the vine, it cannot produce the fruit it was designed to bear.* The analogy is sound. Apart from the presence and power of God, nothing in our lives will bear fruit for God’s kingdom, fruit that will remain. In Him and by His power, every act of service for Christ and His Church can do so.

~Take it to heart (applications)~

I. Do we belong to God as His servants?

II. Are we offering our gifts and service to Him for the advance of the Good News of Jesus Christ?

III. Are we serving by the strength which only He can supply?

³ Caughey, p. 96.