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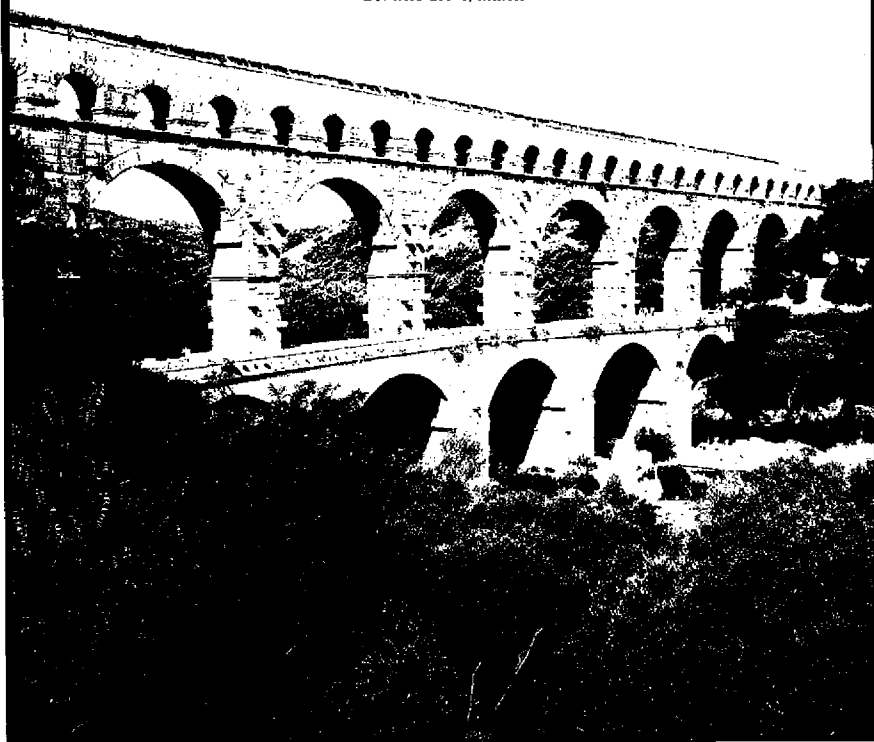
# COLOSSIANS

## R E M I X E D

SUBVERTING THE EMPIRE

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## A SUFFERING ETHIC



### *Nympha's Trial*

It has turned out to be quite the day; the summons I feared has finally come. I, Nympha, follower of Jesus, leader of a house church in Laodicea, successful businesswoman, have finally been called to meet with the city magistrates to explain the conduct of my community. I've been expecting the summons, and I'm not overawed by these magistrates. Most of them were still wet behind the ears when I became a prominent benefactor, and few of them have been able to contribute to the upbuilding of this city as much as I did in my day. To this day I walk past archways and courtyards built by my workers that contain statues of the emperor paid for by my wealth. And some of the imperial games that I sponsored are still spoken of for their opulence and lavish ceremony. I can easily hold my head up in front of these magistrates.

What surprised me is the way I was summoned. No protocol, no proper deference shown to a woman of my stature. Just a short command from a slave that I had better present myself as soon as possible. Or else.

So what could I do? I summoned my foreman and outlined which of my workshops and farms needed to be visited today. I also asked him to make arrangements for the evening meal for those of our community who were currently assisting with the fieldwork. Then, donning my plainest robes, I made haste to the place of the magistrates, beside the marketplace.

As I walked I pondered what might have prompted the summons. Ever since we Christians in Laodicea had begun meeting, we were viewed with suspicion. At first we were viewed as a potentially subversive political group just for meeting together and sharing a meal at which everyone was equal. But then some of our other actions began to get attention. It became known that we did not attend the festivals and imperial games staged by the empire. Our attitudes toward marriage were unpopular, especially since the emperor had decreed that marriage was mandatory for everyone.

Business leaders were incensed when some members of our community began to free their slaves. A number of our members have been tried and even found guilty for treason and subversion. Some have been sent to Rome; more have become fodder for the gladiatorial games here in Laodicea or in neighboring Colossae.

But today was different. Up until now the magistrates had tended to pick on those in the community who had no civic connections. Say what you will, it is easier to throw some poor peasant to the lions than a prominent member of the business community who might have family willing to fight for them. And today's summons felt different. It was a summons to me to come and speak for my *ekklesia*, my church. What could that mean?

When I arrived at the marketplace, I saw that everyone there knew about me. Conversations abruptly ceased or became muted as I went by. And as I reached the portico of the magistrates' offices, I could sense an expectant hush behind me. Suddenly I was struck by the absurdity of the situation. Was this not the sort of summons to be expected by a follower of Jesus? I felt a lightening of my mood, and on a whim, I turned around and waved at the crowd. They were taken aback; I could hear the collective gasp. But far at the back I noticed a few hands waving back. I would not be alone.

As I entered the magistrates' atrium, the same slave who had summoned me led me through to the largest room. They were all there, all seven of the magistrates who administered the laws of the emperor to the people of Laodicea. I knew them all; some of them had been my friends when I walked in the way of darkness; some of them still were business cronies of my husband. I looked around the table: Rufus, Felix, Cassius, Aquila, Eutychus, Trolius, Lucius. Cassius indicated where I should stand.

Trolius, who was pontifex magnus, began without preamble. "A document has come to our attention, Nympha, which indicates that the followers of Christus who meet in your house are part of a larger movement of subversion against the emperor. We have only a fragment of the document, so we do not know what kind of revolutionary activities it outlines, but the portion that we have obtained indicates treason of the highest order. How do you answer this charge?"

Well, even though I was a woman, I knew something about judicial procedure. "What is this document, Trolius, and how did you obtain it? How do you know it is a fragment of a document from followers of Christus? I cannot defend myself if I don't even know the evidence on which I am being accused."

Trolius looked at the others. Some were shaking their heads, others nodded. Clearly there had been some disagreement about how the trial should proceed. And I could see why. As a woman I had no legal standing; they could easily have imprisoned me without this trial. It said something about my own—and my husband's—status in the community that they had summoned me at all. Trolius thought for a moment; then he picked up a fragment of parchment, unrolled it and began to read.

heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

As he read, the silence in the room deepened. And no wonder, for the magistrates had got their hands on one of the most widely circulated poems about Jesus. It had first appeared in Paul's letter to the assembly in Colossae but had spread quickly throughout the communities in Asia Minor as a word of hope for weary Christians. And I couldn't imagine a more damning document to have to defend. If treason was the charge, then this document surely supported it.

Of course I didn't say that to them. I knew that in the end the charges could be sustained. But that air of absurd lightheartedness was still with me. First I would have some fun. I would make them explain the whole document to me, and in so doing I might have a chance to show them a little more about Jesus than they could ask or imagine. Bearing witness happens in the most unlikely places; this would be mine. But for the moment I kept silence.

"Well, Nympha." Trolius spoke sharply, "What have you to say? Is this or is this not the Christus whom you worship?"

"Yes," I answered. "Yes, this is a description of Jesus the Christ, the One whom I worship."

"Then would you be so kind as to explain this document to us?" Trolius asked.

"Certainly," I replied. "It would be a pleasure." I saw Rufus raise his head sharply. He had caught the note of laughter in my voice and looked puzzled.

"You see," I began, "this is a hymn to Jesus modeled on the poetry of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. More specifically, it is a creation story that moves from the first creation, when humanity was created in the image of God, to the new creation, where humanity is reconciled to God. The language used is that of the wisdom writings, where Sophia, Wisdom, is the firstborn of the creation and assists the Maker of the Universe in bringing all things into being."

"Enough!" The word cut me off sharply. "Enough of this rubbish!" It was Lucius, one of the youngest magistrates. "This may look like an ancient Hebrew poem, but it is a direct attack on the emperor. Jesus is the image of God, indeed! If we want to see the image of the one who represents the gods to us, we look to Caesar, no one else. That is why his image is everywhere we look: in the marketplace, on the city gates, at the entrance to the temple, even above our heads here in the chambers of the magistrates. In our homes, on our coins, everywhere we acknowledge that it is the image of Caesar to whom we owe thanksgiving, honor and devotion. Do you tell us that you

deny the rule of Caesar, Nympha? You see how this poem continues; don't you dare tell me that any more of it is ancient Israelite Scripture," he sneered.

"Actually," I replied, "that's exactly what it is. This hymn asserts what every Jew has confessed throughout Israelite history: that God is the One who has created all things, that all things hold together in God. But unlike the ancient Israelite Scripture, this hymn proclaims that Jesus is the One through whom God did all these things, he is the One who created all rulers and authorities and throne and powers . . ."

"Can't someone stop this woman?" Lucius cried out. "Not only does she claim that Jesus, not Caesar, is the image we should worship, she also claims that this Jesus has ultimate authority over all other rulers and powers! She denies the lordship of Caesar, she puts another ruler over him!"

"Surely you don't believe this, Nympha." It was Aquila who spoke. He had known me for many years. "You may say that you believe this poem, but surely you don't live as if this Jesus is lord. You can't tell me that you no longer have images of Caesar in your household. Surely your murals, the images over your lintels, those exquisite goblets you had made in Rome, those things are still central to your life. You haven't given everything over for this Jesus, have you?" He ended on a pleading note, and I knew what he was trying to do. He was trying to give me a way out, a chance to redeem myself before the council.

But before I could answer, someone answered for me. "But of course she has," came a deep, slow voice. It was Eutychus, an old friend of my father who had come to see me about some of my recent business practices that had puzzled him. "Of course she has," he continued. "I myself have been to her house. Nothing remains to remind her of the empire and its rulers and its glorious history. No murals, no statues, no goblets with the vines of prosperity. Not so much as a hairbrush with the symbols of peace or a lamp with the symbols of victory. All is gone.

"And there is more. Her business has become tainted by this Jesus as well. She has released all of her slaves. She has given many of her farms away to the poor in surrounding villages, and the remainder she works with hired laborers who are fed and clothed. She has refused to provide the purple cloth for the dignitaries of the emperor, as you well know, and has reduced the fortune of her father dramatically. It is beginning to have an adverse affect in the villages. Now the peasants are asking other merchants why they are not returning the farms that the farmers lost in the famine, and the slaves of our households are working themselves up to revolt with dreams of freedom. This teaching is not only treasonous to the empire, it is fundamentally bad for business, and with all due respect, the latter is of as much importance to me as any sacrifice. If we lose our entitlement to the cheap labor of slaves and the amassing of property, where will the basis be for our growth?" Eutychus stopped, amid nods from the other magistrates.

"You see that you are accused of undermining the social fabric," said Trolius. "Your actions are eating away at the foundations of our society."

Before he could continue, I took a deep breath and plunged in. "Me, undermining the social fabric?" I said mildly. "Me? Look at your business practices! You think that working slaves to death for your own profit makes for healthy community and a solid society? You want to keep collecting farms, but in order to do so you need to prey on those who cannot pay their taxes to the emperor, those who are impoverished because they work only to keep food on your tables. You can't claim to be weaving a solid social fabric yourself when you drive people into poverty so that your profit margin can keep rising. You can say that business is more important to you than sacrifice to the emperor, but you know, Eutychus, that the two go hand in hand. You know that with an emperor as the head of this body politic, you will always have tax laws that favor the rich, you will always be able to seize the land of the poor, you will always be able to eat your sumptuous feasts during the festivals while your neighbors get the smallest oatcakes and a sip of wine.

"Lucius is right. This text about Jesus is fundamentally opposed to the lordship of Caesar. But I am right too: this text is just like an ancient Hebrew prophetic text which stands as a challenge to the empire."

Since they were all staring at me in stunned silence, I continued. "But the body that Jesus heads is fundamentally different. That's why we call Jesus the head of the body, not the body politic of the empire but the body of something new, the *ekklesia*, the assembly. We know that you call your political organizations the *ekklesia*, and we know they are places where the grossest inequality rules, where some are fed twice as much food as others and some are relegated to the fringes of every banquet even if they have paid their dues. Well, our *ekklesia* is in direct challenge to all of this. Do you wonder why people are flocking to our meetings? It is because we offer hope for a better kingdom, where all meet together as equals, where all are fed at the table of our Lord, where the poor are cared for and none go hungry, where forgiveness and love are practiced. This is a kingdom where peace rules. And that peace is rooted so firmly in the hope of Hebrew prophecy that everyone who hears the promise of peace that Jesus offers knows that a new world has come, where the Creator God is partisan on behalf of all those the empire excludes."

"But surely, Nympha," said Trolius, "you must acknowledge that Caesar is the one who truly brought peace. Look at the empire; it encompasses the whole of the world. There has never been such a ruler."

I confess that what I said then surprised even myself. "Caesar has brought peace? Let's look at the peace brought by your Caesar. Let's take as an example Galilee, the homeland of Jesus. All the Jewish people want to do is live in peace in their own land, free to follow their ancestral laws, with a king from their own people and a high priest from the priestly line. And the Romans continually beat them down, imposing rulers who oppress them and impoverish them. When they rebel they are ruthlessly cut down, their cities burned and their children enslaved. This is how Rome keeps peace,

by military might and violent force. They make a desolation and call it peace.

"Their favorite symbol for peace is the cross, on which they condemn those who resist their rule to an excruciating death. This is the peace they bring. This is the peace that killed Jesus."

There was a shocked silence. "You don't mean to tell me," said Trolius, "that this Jesus you worship was killed as a political rebel!"

"Yes, I do," I said. "And through that death, by taking the evil of Rome and the evil of the universe upon himself, he exhausted it and brought a peace and a reconciliation deeper than any peace Caesar can even dream of. By emptying himself in love, he reconciled all things, in heaven, on earth, everything in the Roman empire and beyond, between all of creation and all of you and God. That is the kind of peace Jesus brought through the blood of a Roman cross."

"Enough!" It was Lucius again. "I say that not only have we heard enough from this woman's own mouth to condemn her; we have also seen how the actions of her household and community fundamentally challenge the empire and all it stands for. There is now no doubt in my mind that she stands guilty as charged, and all those who confess this Jesus with her.

"Let us now keep her in custody and begin immediately to gather those who meet in her house, before word gets out that we are doing so. These people are a threat to the security of the empire, the security of our society and the security of our wealth. We must not let them continue to meet to spread these seditious teachings."

"Nympha," said Aquila, "you realize that your situation is very grave. Do you wish to change anything you have said?"

"Nothing," I answered, "except to say that Jesus is my Lord, not Caesar, and in my flesh I am happy to complete what is lacking in his afflictions for the sake of his body, the church."

"That's enough!" said Trolius, sharply. "We will send immediately to have her followers rounded up. Who will go to the guards?"

"I will." It was Rufus, who had up until now said nothing. "I will send a slave immediately to notify the guards."

"Good," said Trolius. "Do not delay; they have ears everywhere. The guards will know a few of her followers and by applying torture will discover the rest."

I watched Rufus go with elation in my heart. For a few months now he had been coming secretly to our meetings. I knew that before sending a slave to the guards, Rufus would send another slave, a Christian named Malchus, to go and warn the saints.

### ***Whose Story Is This?***

This is, of course, a fictional story. We do not know whether any such trial ever occurred or whether the Nympha we meet in the New Testament ever saw through the implications of her faith in this way. We do know, however, that a poem such as that



found in Colossians 1:15-20 would have to be judged as seditious in the context of the Roman empire. And we know that Christians under persecution for their faith were not likely to avail themselves of the defense that faith in Jesus Christ was of no consequence to the empire. No, for both Jews and Christians of the first century, the imperial gospel of Caesar's lordship was in clear conflict with both the Jewish conviction that there is "no Lord but God," and the Christian proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So whose story is this? It is the story of the church. More precisely, it is the story of the church in conflict with the story of the empire. Two metanarratives, two overarching grand tales of redemption, two gospels, come into conflict precisely in the local story, the little narrative of this community and its sister communities in the Lycus Valley.

Paul makes clear to the Colossian community that they have a place in the metanarrative that he poetically evokes in his letter to them. Indeed he provides transition from the poem's sweeping vision to its localized impact in the life of this community by grammatically echoing the poem's middle strophes. Remember how that middle section is structured (Col 1:17-18):

And he is before all things . . .

And he is the head of the body . . .

Bringing the cosmic claims about Christ to bear on the lives of the Colossian community, in their struggles and their stories, Paul personalizes and localizes the "and he" of the poem by writing, "*And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled*" (1:21-22). The counterimperial vision of cosmic reconciliation in Christ is the vision that has transformed this community into a subversive body politic, counter to the empire. This metanarrative of creational reconciliation through the blood of a Roman cross—a story that radically contests the imperial metanarrative of violence and oppression—reshapes and reconstitutes this community as citizens of the kingdom rather than subjects of the empire.

But as we have seen, this reconciliation travels the path that leads to a cross. It is therefore not surprising that to be a servant of this gospel, to proclaim this alternative sovereignty in a world of violence, would entail suffering. If the hope of Israel's story is to be found in a suffering servant (Is 53) and Jesus is that suffering servant, it is not surprising that suffering is integral to the life of anyone who embraces this story as their own. So Paul says, "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (1:24). This verse has confused and befuddled the church for generations. How can Paul say that he is "completing what is lacking" in Christ's afflictions? How can anything be lacking from what Christ did at the cross? Surely Christians believe that Christ's work on the cross was all-sufficient.

This whole book has been an exercise in hermeneutics. How do we read the an-

cient text of Colossians in such a way that we maintain its integrity and still hear it speak to us in a very different historical and cultural context? But we have also seen that the question is, how do we read this text in a very different *theological* context? How do we allow this text to challenge the theological presuppositions that we might bring to it? This has especially been the issue in dealing with "absolutes" that may or may not be discerned in the text. Now, coming to the end of our discussion, we meet this passage about filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, and we immediately feel a tension between what Paul is saying and what Christianity, in most of its manifestations, has taught about the sufficiency of Christ's suffering.

This gives rise to a small bit of hermeneutical advice: If in reading Scripture we come up against a text that seems to be in conflict with a received doctrine of our theological tradition, we must hold that doctrine more lightly. Notice what we are saying. We are not saying that we should quickly abandon any doctrine just because we find one text that seems to contradict it. No, we are saying that we should hold the doctrine *more lightly*. We should allow the text to relativize our received traditions. After all, didn't Paul write that "all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction . . ." (2 Tim 3:16)? Well then, that must mean Scripture has authority to correct even our theological traditions.

### ***The Story of Jesus Is a Story of Suffering***

What does that mean with regard to this text about "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions"? Paul seems to be suggesting that the suffering of Jesus on the cross is not the end of all suffering, especially for the church.

Maybe we need to now go beyond the question *whose story is this?* to *what kind of story is this?* If Paul is preoccupied with the story of Jesus, and if this story shapes the identity and character of the community that receives his gospel as true over against imperial claims, then what kind of a story is this? What kind of a story did Nympha embrace when she threw in her lot with Jesus, and what kind of story is still on offer to us living at the beginning of the twenty-first century?

The answer is that this is a story of suffering. But that suffering neither began nor ended with either Jesus or Paul. We argued earlier in this book that the biblical narrative as a whole is a tale of a suffering God who will stop at nothing to reconcile this broken world. And now we see that if Jesus brings that suffering to a head in the most cosmic conflict between good and evil, then to make his story our story is to embrace a tale of suffering.

That is why in the fiction with which we began this chapter, Nympha was not surprised to find herself called before the authorities on account of her faith. There is a radical identification here between the church and Jesus. Think about it for a moment. Throughout this letter, Paul refers to the church as the "body" of Christ (1:18, 24; 2:10; 3:15). While we have seen that this is a politically loaded term, we also need

to remember that the use of the metaphor of “body” suggests an intimately close identification of the church with Jesus himself. The church is “the body of Christ.” God still takes on flesh in this world, Christ’s body is still a life-giving presence—in the church.

What happened to the body of Christ during his ministry among us? Where did that ministry, that story of redemption, ultimately lead? To a cross, of course. So is it any wonder that Paul (or Nympha) would understand such a cross-bearing suffering to be an integral dimension of what it means to be “the body of Christ” in the world? Is it any wonder that a community shaped by a narrative of a suffering God would itself become a cruciform suffering community? The only wonder is that the contemporary church so often is *not* such a community.

Paul seems to think that it is his lot to “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” *for the sake of* Christ’s body, the church. What could this possibly mean? The word *affliction* is never used anywhere else in the New Testament to refer to Christ’s suffering on the cross. So it would seem Paul is not saying that a certain amount of pain or suffering had to be meted out and that that quota wasn’t met on Good Friday, so he will fill it up. This would not be an exegetically supportable interpretation, and it is also much too mechanistic a view of redemptive suffering to make any biblical sense.

Rather, it would seem Paul is saying that identification with Jesus, and specifically being his body in a world that is still hostile to his rule, means that *the church will experience affliction*. That’s what it means to be the body of Christ. Further, Paul’s own afflictions—remember, he writes this epistle from prison (Col 4:18)!—are for the sake of the body, for the sake of the church.

On the surface, this is not all that complicated to understand. Paul is in prison because of his ministry on behalf of the body in spreading this empire-threatening story of Jesus. So in his “flesh,” in the suffering he endures as a prisoner of the empire, he suffers “for the sake of” the church.

We also need to pay attention to the kind of suffering Paul is talking about. As already noted, the word *affliction* that Paul uses here (*thlipseōn*) is never actually used in accounts of Christ’s suffering on the cross. But this term is used extensively throughout the Scriptures to denote various kinds of oppression. Whether we are talking about the imperial oppression of Egypt and Babylon on Israel, the oppression of the poor by the rich or the oppression Christians experienced at the hands of the authorities, all such overtones are carried by this word.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a better translation here is “in my flesh I complete what is lacking in the oppression of the Messiah, for the sake of the body, that is, the church.” Insofar as the Messiah, as the representative of the people, was oppressed, so Paul in his suffering is also oppressed for the sake of

<sup>1</sup>Heinrich Shlier, “*thlibo, thlipsis*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley,

the Messiah's people, the church, for whom he has become a servant (1:25). This is a recurring theme in Paul's letters. The oppression he experiences is for the sake of the community that also shares in Christ's oppressions (2 Cor 1:3-7). He has suffered the loss of all things in order to share in the Messiah's sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that he may attain the resurrection (Phil 3:8-11). And he calls believers to suffer with the Messiah so that they may be glorified with him (Rom 8:17). Therefore the expectation of those who live this story is that they too will participate in this pattern of dying and new life to which Jesus calls his followers.

Paul's use of *oppression* (*thlipsis*) to describe his own suffering on behalf of the church strikingly underscores again the imperial context of the Colossian Christians. Just as Jesus' death was the result of oppressive political maneuvering on the part of both Jewish leaders and the Romans, who were threatened by the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God, so the continued oppression the Christian community in Colossae faced was the result of their proclaiming an alternative kingdom and living in subjection to a Lord other than Caesar. Paul weaves together the oppression of the Messiah and the oppression he is experiencing in his imprisonment at the hands of the empire, so that his afflictions are identified with the Messiah's and are therefore redemptive for Christ's body, the church.

For Paul the church is one body. It may have various local manifestations—in Colossae, Laodicea, Cape Town, Auckland, Santiago, Belize City, Caledonia—but the church is not plural, it is one. Now this church participates in its Savior's redemption of the world by sharing in his suffering, through radical identification with the "body" of a crucified Lord. As Christ did battle with the "principalities and powers" at the cross, so also the church continues to bear the fury of these powers in anticipation of their final subjugation to Christ at his return.

Paul's claim to joy in the midst of this suffering has the effect of placing the Colossian Christians in a long storyline that stretches from the suffering of God in the Old Testament through the suffering of the Messiah to the suffering of the Christian community in the present. If the grand metanarrative that underlies the Colossian poem in 1:15-20 is to be applied to the local narrative of this community, then it will be a narrative that goes through the sufferings of the cross. So Paul can respond, "Let the empire rage in its fury, let it strike me with all it has, let it throw me into prison, let it mobilize its military and legal structures of oppression! I know that all of this is ultimately disarmed and pacified at the cross."

But for those of us who live at the heart of the empire, this all raises a very uncomfortable question. If, as Paul asserts throughout his letters, we are called to share in the sufferings of Christ, and if such suffering is for the sake of the body of Christ, where does that leave a Christian community that seems to *avoid* any sort of suffering? Where does it leave those of us whose lives seem to be blessed by the empire rather than threatened by it? Where does it leave those of us whose blessings seem to actu-

ally be dependent on the oppression of our brothers and sisters elsewhere?

We shall return to these questions at the end of this chapter. But here Paul points toward answers by describing how he himself left a life of inflicting violence for a life of bearing it by becoming the servant of the church. And central to that servanthood was a commission, or a stewardship, from God to make known the "mystery" that had been "hidden throughout the ages" (1:26). Again, this seems to be an imperial reference. The priests of the imperial order used mystery language in reference to sacred rites that usually resulted in a revelation of the image of the emperor.<sup>2</sup> Paul turns this image on its head. Instead of revealing the image of a lord whose rule is demonstrated by violence and oppression over subjugated peoples, Paul's mystery reveals a different Lord—Jesus, the Christ. The Messiah is revealed *among the nations*; it is in their midst that this image of God can be seen.

Paul heightens this point by describing this Messiah as "the hope of glory" (1:27). In Israel's Scriptures, glory language is linked to humanity's bearing the image of God (as in Ps 8). When Israel is unfaithful, it exchanges its glory, its own image-bearing of God, for "graven" images that are futile (Ps 106:20; Jer 2:11; Hos 4:7; Rom 1:23). The hope of glory therefore is a hope in which the Colossian Christians will once again be full image-bearers of God. The mystery the Messiah reveals is that this full image-bearing of God, this glory, will be found among both Gentiles and Jews, breaking down the ethnic divisions that have led to one people's continued oppression of another.

Because "glory" is linked closely to "suffering" in Paul's letters, it is no surprise that they are found in close proximity here. Paul is most explicit on this connection in Romans 8: we will be heirs of Christ "if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:17). The dynamic of the Colossians passage makes this same movement from sharing in Jesus' suffering to the hope of glory, from sharing in the dehumanizing oppression of the empire to realization of our full humanness in the kingdom of God. Entering the story of the suffering God, following the Messiah who brings peace through the blood of the cross by sharing in his suffering, this community bears the image of that God and that Messiah and thereby becomes mature, complete and whole in Christ (Col 1:28).

Paul's overriding concern in this letter is the community's maturity in Christian faith. They have received a radical hope in the gospel that is counter to the imperial optimism and arrogance all around them. He writes so that they will not shift from that hope (1:23). That is why he writes that God has revealed to them "the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." The whole story is about Jesus.

<sup>2</sup>S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984) nn 190-91.

If William, Elanna and Eric are to find their way in a postmodern world into some kind of Christian commitment, it will have to be because they find Jesus as attractive as Nympha did in our first narrative. The hope that can break through the despair of postmodern anomie and the numbness of oversatiated consumerism is not fundamentally a matter of "adopting" a worldview or even of "accepting" an alternative meta-narrative. More foundationally, this hope is realized in a person and in a relationship: "Christ in you."

### *Our Story*

If Colossians 1:21-29 provides a transition from the cosmic vision of the Colossian poem to the local realities of the Colossian community, Paul's concluding comments in chapter 4 of the letter make it even more personal. Not surprisingly, the themes of suffering, service, mystery and maturity in Christ all reappear in the concluding chapter. After offering a provocative countervision to the empire and calling the community to live out a gospel that challenges the imperial imagination and the social and economic structures of imperial society, Paul reminds his listeners of where this gospel, this alternative discipleship, has landed him: in prison (4:3). The implications are clear: if you, as a community that follows the Messiah, really proclaim this mystery, this good news that overturns the boundaries between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, then you should expect to share in the sufferings of Christ.

Paul's greetings and closing instructions draw to conclusion all the dimensions of the gospel we have explored in this book. Onesimus, runaway slave, is commended as a faithful and beloved brother, sent with Tychicus to report about Paul to the community (4:9). Could Paul have more clearly indicated that the distinction between slave and free is erased in Christ than in giving Onesimus this task? Could he have more powerfully undermined the imperial stigma of runaway slave than he did by calling Onesimus "faithful"? Could he have more powerfully undermined the imperial distinction between slave and master than by calling Onesimus a "beloved brother, who is one of you"?

Similarly, Paul's greeting to Nympha and the church in her house (4:15) indicates a level of female leadership that sits uneasily with both empire and synagogue. And in his references to such a diverse group of people as his coworkers we meet in the flesh the kind of cultural and ethnic diversity that he insists is made one in Christ. In this radical band of coworkers there really is neither Greek nor Jew. Paul's closing greetings therefore give us a glimpse into the way the early Christian community confounded the careful social manipulations of the empire with its racial profiling and socioeconomic and gender restrictiveness.

But Paul ends this letter with two statements that are a call. The first is personally directed to someone named Archippus. Paul's word to him is "See that you complete

the task that you have received in the Lord" (4:17). We have offered a fictionalized interpretation of what the ministry was to which Archippus was called. But in fact no one knows what the call was—at least no one except Paul and, presumably, Archippus. Perhaps as a member of Philemon's household, Archippus had the ministry of interpreting the radical implications of Paul's gospel to his slave-owning kinsman or friend (see Philem 1-2). We do know that Paul here moves his attention from the community as a whole to the role of one member of it. Archippus has a call, a service to perform, and Paul reminds him of the ministry he has received "in the Lord." In our story of Nympha, she too had to follow through the implications of her discipleship to the end; this was the ministry she was called to fulfill. And it was a ministry that required suffering.

This brings us to the second and concluding call of this letter. Addressing the community as a whole, Paul writes, "Remember my chains" (4:18). Those who are called to service must remember where that service leads: to chains, suffering, oppression.

What does all of this mean for a church that seems not to suffer, but rather to thrive, under empire? What does it mean to remember the apostle's chains for a community that has made its peace with an enslaving empire? Perhaps we need to overhear Paul's admonition to Archippus and apply it to ourselves as Christians living at home in the imperial realities of the Pax Americana. We are called to proclaim and embody the gospel of a crucified Messiah. This gospel challenges the principalities and powers of our own age. This gospel proclaims that reconciliation and peace come not through the power of unilateral military force but through the blood of the cross. And such a reconciliation is manifest in a community that is renewed in the image of Jesus, a community that shares in the suffering of Jesus in its attempts to bring peace to the social, economic, political, racial and ethnic divisions that sin has caused in the world. In proclaiming and living that gospel, this community will begin to take on the suffering of those who have been oppressed throughout the ages at the hands of the empire. In taking on that suffering, the Christian community will truly enact peace by sharing in Christ's afflictions.<sup>3</sup> This is the call and the challenge with which Paul ends *Colossians*. And the letter of *Colossians* does not function as Scripture in the life of the church if this call is not heard and responded to by the church today.

"Say to Archippus . . ." Paul gets quite personal at the end of this letter. And so do we. We need to end the way we began. William is worried that a theism that reads Scripture will be an oppressive religion full of absolutes punching him in the face. Elanna is ethically paralyzed in the postmodern cacophony. And Eric smells fascism under every truth claim. But Nympha meets in Paul's gospel a Jesus who invites her into a covenantal relationship of wholeness, setting her free from the oppressive ab-

<sup>3</sup>An example of such a community is Christian Peacemakers Teams, who have gone throughout the world,

solutes of the empire. She is set free into a subversive praxis of secession from the empire and a communal ethic of full-life restoration in Christ. The truth she encounters in the communities that have been spawned by this gospel is no fascist repression but a radical liberation.

So we say to Eric, come into the embrace of the Other who rules, but from a cross, who is sovereign but wears a crown of thorns. To Elanna we say, give Paul a hearing, and more important, give the Jesus whom Paul proclaims a hearing. See if in his voice you might find a way through the cacophony that will set you free for liberating praxis. And we invite our friend William into a living story recorded both in the pages of Paul's letter to the Colossians and, we pray, in the lives of an alternative community that follows Christ, who is all and in all. Yes, William, Paul's vision is total; he is pre-occupied with "all." But that is because everything is at stake in this gospel, and the God we meet in Jesus will not rest until all things are reconciled.

*What about me?*

Yes, of course, how could we forget you, our faithful dialogue partner? We remind you again that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Keep digging for those treasures. Never give up your tenacity for truth. Never trade the riches of Christ for any deceitful worldview that would take you captive. This life-giving story is your story. Go out and make it live.



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