

Colossians 1:24-2:5

We've just completed perhaps the great Christological passage in all of Scripture, where the wonder, glory, and authority of Christ is made very evident. Paul then discussed God's great plan of redemption ("although you were formerly alienated...He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death").

Now, Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, turns the corner and speaks of his own role in God's great plan of redemption. While this might sound arrogant, in the context of the entire letter, the reader's mind is so overwhelmed by the person of Christ that Paul's role seems a mere bit part.

Two great themes appear in this passage, and to some extent, Paul hops back and forth between the two. They are:

- Paul's heart for the Colossians and the content of his desire for them. Look for this throughout the passage, and remember again, that Paul has never met a single member of this church, has never visited the town. His passion comes not from a long-lasting relationship, but from his passion for Christ.
- Paul's message that the great mystery and the hope of glory is Christ. Nothing more, nothing less. This is a bit of a dig at the Gnostics who held out that hope of secret knowledge, but beyond that, it springs from Paul's own personal wonder at God in Christ (see Romans 11:33-36 for another, non-Gnostic example).

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

Again, Paul "boasts" of his role as a minister of the Gospel. Even the sufferings that he endures because of his ministry are well worth it, both for the Colossians' sake and for Christ's.

The phrase "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" can cause some confusion. Make very clear that nothing Christ's death and resurrection were sufficient for our salvation (what we've already read in Colossians about what Christ has done makes that abundantly clear. So what does this mean? Revelation 6:9-12 suggests that there is a finite amount of suffering and martyrdom that the church must undergo before Christ will return (cf. Matthew 24:21-22), and whenever the church suffers, Jesus himself suffers, just as when the body suffers, the brain senses/feels it. Acts 9:5 is the clearest example of this idea. Paul is aware that in his suffering, Christ himself is afflicted, and he is working to bring about the completion of Christ's afflictions.

Perhaps the main thrust of these two verses, though, is the great honor and value of the station of preacher. Paul was given a stewardship (that is, something for which he will be held accountable) to "fully carry out the preaching of the word of God." His role is not to be taken lightly.

Likewise, those of us who are preachers should rejoice that we are allowed to understand and expose the truth of the eternal Word of God. But we should also be very careful to preach accurately, truthfully, and fully—looking to benefit others and not ourselves. Looking not to tell people what they want to hear, but what the word of God says. This role is a stewardship, that is, a gift of God for which we will be held accountable.

Those of us who are not preachers should give preachers the appropriate amount of respect. We should also not rush to become a preacher, for it is not a job to be taken lightly. In God's economy, the wise CEO distributes resources generously, accept what you're given. We are all called to share the Gospel, but to fully preach the word of God requires much more diligence and life sacrifice.

...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.

Read the tail end of v. 25 again to complete the sentence. In preaching the word of God, what Paul is preaching is “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations.” Paul really builds up this mystery rhetorically. It is:

- The mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations
- What has now been manifested to His saints
- What God has willed to known
- Composed of the riches of the glory

Clause after clause comes through, builds the reader’s anticipation to say, “Okay! What is this mystery? What is the great thing that God has kept hidden for thousands of years and has now revealed? What could be so marvelous?

Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Now the Old Testament makes clear that a Messiah will come and lead Israel. And the Old Testament makes clear that all the nations will come and worship on Mount Zion. So what is new information?

That this Christ is not just a leader, but one who dwells within us. The fall meant that we could no longer know God, that was the relationship that Adam lost, and that is what the New Covenant promises and what Jesus prayed for his followers (see Genesis 3:23-24, Jeremiah 31:33-35, John 17:3). Christ allows us to know God again, but more wondrously than ever, for he lives within us. (To be intellectually honest, we should point out that “you” is plural. Paul is stating that Jesus dwells within the church of Colossae, but he also dwells in individual believers through his Holy Spirit, see Romans 8:14-17).

Second, Paul specifies that “the riches of the glory of this mystery” is “among the Gentiles.” What can this mean? We’ve forgotten the distinction between Jew and Gentile, but the intelligent Gentile knew that if the God of the Jews was really the one true God, then he (the Gentile) was without hope. Foreigners are servants, scavenging for whatever scraps the chosen ones leave. And for the Jews? They were to care for aliens, but they also knew that the Gentiles did not have the word of the Lord and His favor.

But Paul says that the Gentiles will not only come and worship the Lord, but will actually be made one with Israel. We can know God, too. We are grafted into the tree and we are one race (cf. Romans 11:17, Galatians 3:28). We are not the ugly stepchild, we are co-heirs welcomed home.

And that, being accepted into the family and knowing God through Christ, that is the hope of glory.

We proclaim him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also I labor, striving according to his power, which mightily works within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and to those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face

Back to Paul and the Colossians. Notice that Paul struggles greatly for them (“I labor, striving”). Who are you, who am I, striving for? Who do I struggle on behalf of? That they might grow? It is very easy to tell someone truth, to tell them right or wrong, but to strive for someone’s faith over the long haul is a much more difficult (and, in some ways, more God-honoring, task).

Notice also that Paul strives “according to his power, which mightily works within me.” We noticed in 1:11 that it takes God’s glorious might to give us “steadfastness and patience.” Here Paul, the great apostle, needs Christ’s power just to labor on behalf of others. A very commonplace task that requires very supernatural power, apparently.

And why does he strive for the Colossians? To “present every man complete in Christ.” That is the goal of Paul’s ministry. Not evangelism. Not discipleship. Not missions or ministry. It is to take someone who was alienated from God and hostile towards Him and present him complete in Christ. For that is when God is glorified and everything else fits into that.

...that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

This is the reason Paul struggles for the Colossians, and since Paul’s goal for the Colossians is described previous, we can assume that this is what the person who is “complete in Christ” largely looks like. Take a moment and make sure you get it (5 commas in one verse can make for a confusing verse!)

There are two things Paul wants:

1. Hearts knit together in love. This is not an emotional, “hey we really get along” kind of thing, but the unity that the muscles and tendons have because they’re all connected to the head. We are connected to other believers in a mystical way, but also in a very practical way with believers in your own church. Scripturally, there is no such thing as the isolated believer, and in many way we should care more about the spiritual health and growth of our community than we do about our own spiritual health and growth (though the two are irrevocably tied together).

Knit together implies that we are united for a larger purpose (that is, shared mission) and that when we all pull each other’s weight. If one part suffers, we all suffer. How does this reality come about? Through clear teaching of the Gospel, teaching and demonstration of love by leaders, and hard day in and day out work by those who are knit together.

2. The glory of Christ. Everything is found in him. You want “a full assurance of understanding”? Know God’s mystery. And what is that? Christ. That’s it. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in him. Dallas Willard writes that Jesus knew calculus better than anyone else, for he invented it, but we don’t think of Jesus as smart. But all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in him. Spiritual wisdom and knowledge. Material wisdom and knowledge. Everything is found in the person of Christ.

Paul uses the word “mystery” earlier in this passage and he does that often in his writing. It’s clear though, the mystery has been made clear. Don’t believe anyone who tells you otherwise. The great God, the creator of the universe, who all peoples have wondered about, has finally revealed His great plan. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard..what God has prepared for those who love Him. But God has revealed it to us”! (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)

I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

Don’t believe anyone who says that there is extra wisdom or knowledge, secrets out there that you have to know. It’s Christ.

The mature believer, Paul says, has stability in their faith in Christ. He rejoices to see their good discipline (literally, good “order”), that is, their faith is in order. Christ is the central point. People will try to pull you away from the person of Christ. Talk more about other things and practices. They will be very persuasive. Don’t drift. Jesus. In him all things (including your faith) hold together.

Sample Study Outline

- I. Pray
- II. Context—Who is Paul? Who are the Colossians? What have they been talking about?
- III. Read Passage
- IV. Exploratory Questions
 - a. What do we see of God in this passage?
 - b. What do we see of man in this passage?
 - c. What's the most important word in the passage?
 - d. What do you make of “filling up what was lacking in Christ's afflictions”?
 - e. Have you had moments of wonder at the hope of glory you have--Christ is in you?
 - f. Why do you think Paul was able to be so passionate about people he had never met?
 - g. What are the persuasive arguments that others might be putting up? Why might those be effective?
- V. Application Questions
 - a. Who are you struggling for?
 - b. Do you have a stewardship given you by God that you need to employ on behalf of another?
 - c. How is your passion for learning, hearing, understanding the full word of God?
 - d. Where else do you look for wisdom and knowledge? What would it mean to find it in Christ?
 - e. Does your faith rest on Christ alone or do you have add-ons?
 - f. How does God call you to action through this passage this week?
- VI. Other questions/thoughts
- VII. So what we've seen here is...
 - a. The importance of the ministry of the Word—preach it wisely, fully
 - b. Hints of what community looks like
 - i. Struggling for others, laboring on their behalf, working for their spiritual good
 - ii. Hearts “knit together in love”
 - c. The wonder of Christ
 - i. He lives in us and has brought us, even Gentiles, to God
 - ii. All treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in him
 - iii. The stable, properly ordered faith, is Christ, Christ, Christ
- VIII. Pray