

Paul's Letter to the

COLOSSIANS

LESSON 3 COLOSSIANS 1:24–2:5

OVERVIEW | COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5

Paul now completes his introduction of himself, before launching into the teaching of 2:6-4:6. He does so with a remarkably full description of his ministry, in order to ensure that the Colossians, who had until now only heard of him second-hand, would understand his reasons for writing.

Having put them on the map of God's purposes in Christ (1:21-23), Paul now places himself on that same map. His writing at the present time is not an odd or arrogant venture. His whole ministry, his suffering, preaching, teaching, hard work, and prayer, has had them in view for some time, and this letter is simply one more facet of his total God-given work, which includes responsibility for them.

Paul's sufferings are to be understood, in some strange sense, as not his own, but Christ's. His preaching and teaching are God's means of accomplishing that which he is doing in Christ. Paul's hard work is accomplished only because Christ is at work in him.



And, if Christ is his motivating and energizing power, Christ is also his goal. Christ's body is the beneficiary of Paul's sufferings (1:24). Christ's indwelling in his people is their hope of glory (1:27). Maturity in Christ is Paul's ambition for every Christian (1:28). Good order in Christ is what he is glad to see in the young church (2:5). Christ himself *is* God's mysterious plan (1:27; 2:2), revealed in every aspect of Paul's work.

By introducing himself in this way, Paul shows where his true credentials lie. He explains in the first paragraph (1:24-29) the nature of his own ministry in Christ; in the second (2:1-5), how this ministry relates to the church in Colossae. He thus follows the pattern he has already used in 1:15-20, 21-23: new creation in Christ, new creation in Colossae.

– N.T. Wright, *Colossians*, 90-91

COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5 (NLT)

Paul's Work for the Church

24 Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. **25** I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— **26** the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. **27** To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. **29** To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

2 I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. **2** My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, **3** in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. **4** I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. **5** For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5

Paul's Work for the Church

Our text this week provides a rather dense summary of Paul's own ministry. Paul has already told the Colossians what he's thanking God for and what he's asking God for when he thinks of them (1:3-14). Now he turns to his own situation to explain who he is and what his work is all about.

The Colossians haven't met Paul, but they have heard about him through people like Philemon and Epaphras, and in particular they have heard he is in prison, which was a serious matter. In the ancient world, prison was not a custodial sentence where someone was sent to prison for a determined length of time. Instead, people were put in prison while the authorities decided what to do with them, and this often meant that prisoners would stay there for some time before eventually being sentenced to death, exile, or to pay a tremendously large fine.

So Paul, writing not only this letter but also his letters to the Philippians and the Ephesians around the same time, wants the Colossians to realize that although he's in prison, his sufferings have a meaning beyond what they might've imagined. Paul sees his own suffering as something which is positively beneficial for the church (1:24).

How can Paul celebrate in his suffering? (1:24-25)

On the one hand, there's a sense that Paul knows that suffering is going to come to most Christians in some form sooner or later. But right now this little church in Colossae is too young for that and wouldn't be able to stand it. And Paul suggests that he can take the suffering on himself for now and spare them for some time.

But then he says something else: "I'm completing in my flesh what is presently lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church" (1:24b). Paul sees his own sufferings as part of what he calls Christ's "afflictions." This is not to be seen as an *addition* to Christ's own suffering; rather, it is to be seen as an *extension* of it. In Mark 8, Jesus himself spoke about his own vocation to go to the cross and to suffer and die. And he said that if anyone wants to come after him, they must take up their cross and follow him. That same theme for Jesus' followers is picked up at the end of John's Gospel and also in 1 Peter and Revelation.

The salvation that was won uniquely when Jesus died on the cross is to be implemented and worked out in the world, not through Christians using the weapons of the world and blasting wicked people out of the way, but through the same ministry of suffering love. Those who follow Christ won't have to die for the sins of the world, but the way in which the gospel works in the world is through – as Jesus himself said – the poor in spirit, the meek, the brokenhearted, the wounded, the vulnerable, the mourners, those who hunger for justice.

This is how the gospel goes to work. And Paul says through this we are completing the Messianic wounds. The life of Jesus includes that very kind of suffering, which somehow God's people must now live through, so that in each generation the unique message of the death and resurrection of Jesus becomes effective in the world.

Paul goes on to talk about being the church's servant according to the terms laid down by God when God commissioned Paul on their behalf (1:25). Paul has a vision of God's plan, and within that plan God calls specific people to do specific jobs. No two people or vocations are alike, but what they all have in common is their commission to fulfill "the word of God" (1:25), working through various contexts to do a variety of God's work. Don't we all want to be a part of something so meaningful that we can rejoice in the hardships that come along with the work? Where sacrifices produce joy? The good news is that, regardless of our job, God has called us to be a part of his work, and each of us have different gifts that we are called to steward joyfully, wherever we find ourselves.

COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5

What is this “mystery” that Paul speaks of in 1:26?

“The word of God” at the end of verse 25 is identified in 1:26 as “the mystery.” The word “mystery” occurs again in 1:27, 2:2, and 4:3, where the “mystery” is identified to be “Christ.” G.K. Beale provides helpful insight into the use and meaning of the word “mystery” throughout the NT and particularly here in Colossians:

“*Mystery*” occurs twenty-eight times in the NT, where it is linked to end-times issues, often with respect to the prophesied kingdom. A feature noticeable in many of the occurrences is that the word is directly linked with OT quotations or allusions. In almost all of these cases, at least, “mystery” appears in order to indicate two things: (1) OT prophecy is beginning fulfillment, and (2) this fulfillment is unexpected from the former OT vantage point. It is apparent that various NT authors understand OT texts in the light of the Christ event and under the guidance of the Spirit, leading to new understandings though still not out of line with the OT idea. Thus, though texts like Daniel 2:18-22, 27-30, 47, may not always be in mind in all of these NT uses, the notion of an end-times prophecy needing further inspired interpretation is.

Is this revealed mystery something that was completely hidden in the OT, or was it partly revealed? Colossians 1:26 might seem to indicate that it was mostly hidden: “the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints.” The content of the mystery was evident to some small degree in the OT, but “now” it is fully revealed. There is no reason not to see the same transition from partial to full revelation in Colossians 1:26, especially since we have seen that the inclusion of the Gentiles in verse 27 was something partly revealed in Daniel 2.

Colossians 1:27 explains the mystery, only briefly introduced in verse 26. The point of verse 27 is that “the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles” is “Christ,” who is “the hope of glory.” “Christ in you” thus emphasizes that the mystery of Christ has *included* the Gentiles along with believing Jews, whereas Gentiles had been excluded from the OT covenant community. Formerly Gentiles were “separate from Christ” and “having no hope” (Eph 2:12), but now Christ “is in” them, and they possess “the hope of glory,” which is Christ (Col 1:27).

The earlier references to the worldwide effect of the gospel (Colossians 1:6, 20, 23) have been leading up to this explicit statement about Gentile inclusion. And Col 3:11 later highlights the same thing: the renewal of people occurs in the sphere of Christ “in which there is no...Greek and Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all.” Christ is “the hope of glory” for the believing Gentiles. (G.K. Beale, *Colossians and Philemon*, 149-51).

The purpose of Paul’s task to announce this mystery “to all people in all wisdom” is to “*present all people mature in Christ*” (1:28). Paul sees the Gospel as a humanizing project. He sees the power of the Spirit in the teaching about Jesus as the thing which makes people more human, not less. So often people have the idea that being a Christian means to be diminished in your humanness, that God wants to stop you from having a good time. That’s not true. In fact, the gospel makes you more human, more like yourself, and even unique from those in whom Christ is also at work, because in the body of Christ we are all to be different in order that we can then work together for a maturity of humanness. And that’s what Paul is talking about, to present everyone grown up and complete in Jesus. And that doesn’t happen overnight. It takes teaching and learning. Teaching in the early church would have undoubtedly included the stories of the Old Testament (which became the “Bible” of the early Christians through the Greek translations), and the stories of Jesus himself. And as people inhabit those stories, and are told about them and taught what they mean, they will be built up and become genuine humans in a whole new way.

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The Source of Paul's Energy (1:29)

How does Paul do this difficult work? He says he does it by “strenuous labor,” literally, “I labor, in a struggling manner” (1:29). His passion was to see the church grow into maturity, and he recognized that there was still work to be done for the world to know the gospel. This is a further explanation of verse 24, what it means that Paul suffers. Paul's struggle, however, is not a solo effort on his part. He is able to continue this hard labor only by God's power: “on the basis of his working, which works in power in me” (1:29).

Paul's ministry is not performed by his own independent contribution together with the help of God's grace. Rather, as he says in 1 Cor 15:10, “*By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace did not become empty in me, but I labored more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God in me.*” God's grace working in us is a sign of genuine Christian work. We have to work hard, but when it's all said and done, we will realize that anything we achieved is the result of God working through us.

Paul's Goal for the Colossians (2:1-5)

In 2:1, Paul repeats that he has “struggled” to present the Colossians complete in Christ; he expands on the details of that struggle and clarifies it. He wants to highlight for them “how great a struggle” it has been, which he has exerted on their behalf and for others in the region (the Laodiceans) who have never met him.

Paul sees this little church in Colossae – this group of a few households, probably not that many people, most of whom were not educated or well off – as a maturing family of Jesus followers living with the Messiah in their midst, the living presence of God cultivating in them an intimate relationship with the one through whom and for whom all creation came into existence and continues to be sustained and ruled (1:15-17). Because Jesus is dwelling there as the Messiah in their midst, Paul says in 2:2-3 that his goal for the Colossians is that they would be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they would have “the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The first goal of struggling to present everyone complete in Christ (1:28-2:1) is that “their hearts may be encouraged” (2:2). *Heart* in the NT, and here, likely have the same notion as in the OT: it represents the inner spiritual center of one's relationship with God, which is linked to the volitional, intellectual, and emotional aspects of a person, all of which form a physical unity. Their hearts, the core of their life, are to be encouraged by them “having been knit together in love” (2:2). In other words, as they are increasingly confident of being on the path to becoming “complete in Christ,” Paul wants their love for another to grow.

In addition, their knowledge that Paul is struggling on their behalf is encouraging in the midst of whatever struggles they are undergoing, knowing they are not alone in their suffering. We all suffer sorrow and grief in various times and for various reasons, and for reasons we don't totally understand, and it helps to have a friend or family member with us in the midst of this. As humans we seem to have the capacity to infuse strength and courage into one another. Paul is taking this idea and saying that as we come together in love in this family of the church, then this will strengthen our hearts and minds. Paul wants them to experience the wealth of “understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is Christ himself.” He wants them to grow up in their wisdom and understanding of Christ as they become people who live in that great poem of Col. 1:15-20.

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Paul goes on to say that Jesus is the place where we will find all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge (2:3). We already have the map because we belong to Jesus, and now Paul says to go and search for the treasure that is found there – the treasure of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. Consider that wherever we look, whether through a telescope at the stars, or through a microscope at the tiniest visible thing, or whatever ideas we explore, all the things that we discover are part of the good creation of the good God, which Paul says were created in and for and through Christ. In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. As the greatest scientists have always known, when we study these things, we are thinking God’s thoughts *after* him. And we should celebrate that.

As verse 4 indicates, the purpose of Paul revealing these things to the Colossians is so that “no one deceives you by means of enticing argument.” He presses the point that they are to be completely focused, committed to Christ for their salvation, and distracted by no other teaching that would take the sole focus away from Christ. As we’ll see toward the end of chapter two, at least part of this false teaching is that believers still need to identify not only with Christ but also with the identity markers of the old law (see 2:16-17, 20-22) – and that, in addition to Christ, they must also give allegiance and worship to something other than Christ (see 2:18-19). To be sure, there were many enticing arguments out there in Paul’s world, just as there are in our own world. People have all sorts of enticing arguments. And Paul says to expect that and don’t be deceived. If they were obviously nonsense then they wouldn’t be any danger to us.

No one should deceive the Colossians with false teaching (2:4), Paul says, because he is with them “in spirit,” though “absent [from them] in body” (2:5). Paul considered his own letters to represent his authoritative presence among those to whom he wrote. His rejoicing is partly because he has confidence that his teaching will counter the false teaching. But the focus is on the fact that since both Paul and the Colossian believers live in union with Christ, Paul is present in his renewed human spirit with them.

In facing the threat of false teaching, which has begun to make inroads into the church community, Paul wants them to maintain good order and stability of their faith in Christ and only Christ. The firm or unwavering condition of their faith has already been touched upon in 1:23 and will be alluded to again in 2:7. Paul is confident that their faith will continue, and now the letter can move forward to the heart of what he wants to teach them.

DISCUSSION & PRAYER

1. What is the most valuable thing you have ever found? How did you find it? What did you do with what you found?

This week we've seen how reflecting on Christ's sacrifice gave Paul the ability to endure his sufferings willfully and with joy. After we gaze at the love that Jesus has for us, it moves us to bring glory to God by our own sacrifices. Take a few moments to examine how you steward your time, talent, and treasure.

2. Where is it hardest to put Christ first above all? Where is it easiest to put Christ first above all? You might start with the categories of time, talent, and treasure, or you might be more specific in your answer.
3. In this passage, Paul describes his ministry as both a calling (1:25) and a struggle (1:29-2:1). Describe the differences between both words. When kingdom work gets hard, do you typically take that as a sign to stop or keep going? (There is no right or wrong answer here!)
4. What kinds of things instill a passion in you great enough to look past struggle and suffering? Why are those things so important to you?
5. In libraries and on the internet there are mountains of information. Paul says we find "all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge" in Christ (2:3). How might Paul understand the difference between information on the one hand, and wisdom and knowledge on the other? In what areas of your life do you especially need the "wisdom and knowledge" of Christ right now?

- **Pray together, asking God to show you things that may be hindering your own maturity in Christ (1:28).**
- **Ask that God's power would be put on display in our lives (especially in our areas of struggle) so that we can be faithful to display with our lives what we profess with our mouths: that Jesus is Lord of all and first in everything.**
- **Ask God to give you tangible ways to steward your time, talent, and treasure for your small group, church, and community.**