

Sermon Series:

New Life in Christ

A study of the book of Colossians



LISTEN UP – THIS IS IMPORTANT!

Colossians 1:25 – 2:5; John 17: 20-26 (Becky Douglass)

Welcome back to Colossians! If you remember from two weeks ago, Paul finished the section by saying, *“The Good News has been preached all over the world (in all creation), and I, Paul, have been appointed as God’s servant to proclaim it.”* (1:23) Paul has been given a job to do, and in today’s passage, we are going to learn a bit more about it.

I have heard several different approaches to this passage over the years. Some preachers analyse Paul’s ministry example and seek to learn from him. Over thirty years ago I heard a talk on the end of chapter 1 which became key for my view of my own ministry. Other speakers mine these verses for some key statements of truth such as *“Christ in you, the hope of glory”* (1:27) and *“In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”*. (2:3) I’ve heard whole sermons preached on just these phrases and they have been excellent!

As I have studied the passage this time, I have been challenged to stop and think about why Paul wrote these verses in this way at this point of this letter. What was Paul doing? One approach I have found helpful is to compare Paul’s writing to Greek rhetoric, or their way of giving speeches. The Greeks are famous for their political and philosophical speeches and there was a general format they followed. After making a connection with their audience as Paul did in his prayers for the Colossians, the speakers would often take time to talk about why people should listen to what they had to say. They would do this by listing their credentials as a speaker and giving reasons why their topic was important.

For instance, which of these two athletes would you be more likely to listen to about being an professional sports person? Nick Kyrgios is often a brilliant tennis player, but he is also famous for his temper tantrums and disrespect for the officials and game of tennis. Adam Gilchrist, on the other hand has always worked hard at his cricket and treated the game with respect. He is loved by cricket fans all over the world because of his hard work for the game. I think what he said would be given more weight than what Nick said.

I think this is what we see Paul doing here. He wants to highlight the importance of what he is saying by explaining how hard he is working for it. They should listen to him because no one is working harder for them and for the Gospel than he is.

You’ll notice the passage has been divided up into 3 paragraphs. The first two paragraphs have a similar structure, talking first about Paul’s work, and then the main message he wants them to know. We’ll talk about Paul’s work from both paragraphs and then his message from both of them. The final paragraph is an encouragement to them to keep going as they are.

An Earnest Messenger

- “I suffer ...” (1:24-25)

Paul starts out by telling us that his ministry has involved suffering. “*I am participating in the sufferings of Christ which continue for His body, the church*”. Other translations say “*I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions*” which I think has given people the impression that somehow Christ’s afflictions for our salvation are lacking in some way. But this is not what Paul is saying here. It might help to look at some of the words used here.

- “participate” or “fill up” come from a Greek word which means to take one’s turn or to fill in for someone.
- “lacking” or “continuing” come from a Greek word which means something which hasn’t been finished yet.
- The Greek word translated as “sufferings” or “afflictions” is never used to talk about suffering for our salvation. It is often used to talk about various tribulations which are a part of the reality of living in this world as God’s people.

Because of this, I think that the NLV translation is probably the most helpful in understanding what Paul is saying. Remember, Jesus said at the Last Supper, “*If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first ... Since they persecuted me, naturally they will persecute you.*” (John 15:18,20) Paul counts it a privilege to be Christ’s servant, even though it involves suffering. He accepts his responsibility to them and even Satan’s attacks won’t stop him because the message he has is so important.

- “I work hard ...” (1:29-2:1)

But Paul doesn’t just suffer from outside attacks. The work itself is hard. He uses a word which is translated “struggle” and “agonise” which means to be engaged in a difficult fight. Even without the outside attacks from Satan, ministry is hard work. Paul gives us a glimpse of that when he talks about admonishing them and teaching them. This requires deep study of God’s Word and sensitive pastoral applications. It requires teaching the truth even when it is unpopular and challenging people to align their lives with that truth. It is impossible without “*depending on God’s might power*”. But he doesn’t seek to do it in his own strength – that would be impossible. He looks to God who promises to give the necessary power as Paul aligns himself with God’s plans and activities. Paul wants them to know that he is working hard to fulfill his responsibility to share God’s message with them, not to bring praise to himself, but to impress on them how important the message is.

An Essential Message

So, what is this message Paul is so passionate about? What is causing him to work so hard and endure such tribulations? It all centres around God’s mystery. In the New Living Translation, they have translated this as “God’s secret” or God’s mysterious plan”. This isn’t a mystery like an Agatha Christie “whodunit”. The idea here is that God has had a plan, a mysterious plan, from eternity past to save us from sin. Through the ages, He has progressively revealed that plan to humanity. We see the first glimpses of it as soon as Adam and Eve sin. He promises to send someone to crush the serpent’s head and He sacrifices animals to make skin coverings for their shameful nakedness. Then he chooses Abraham and promises to bless the world through his family. He rescues the nation of Israel from Egypt and shows them how to live as His people and provides the sacrifices as ways to

seek His forgiveness when they do the wrong thing. Even when they reject Him, he stays faithful to them and promises a new way of salvation through one who will suffer to bring them forgiveness. All of this gave people hints of God's plan, God's mystery. But now, Paul has been given the job of proclaiming the culmination of God's mysterious plan, and that is God's own Son, Jesus Christ.

- Christ in All (1:26-28)

This mystery is revealed in two great truths – Christ in All and All in Christ. In the first paragraph, Christ is for all people, including the Gentiles. God always promised that His people would bring salvation to all the people of the world. The Gentiles are included in His plan of salvation. Paul's unique role was to proclaim that *"the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too!"*

And what is this great and mysterious salvation? *"Christ lives in you!"* Our salvation does not come from a set of rules or rituals, it comes from a relationship with God through the indwelling presence of Christ. We have Christ in us and this is the assurance or hope of sharing God's glory which is His holy presence. In the John passage we read of Jesus talking about this as He prays to His Father: *"I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me."* (John 17:22,23) As His people, indwelt by Christ, we participate in God's presence or glory here on earth. One day, we will enjoy His glory completely when all sin is removed and we are able to be in His presence in heaven. However, here on earth, we experience His glory every day as we are indwelt by Christ and walk with Him.

Paul works hard to teach people these things – to what end? *"We want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ."* This sounds like an impossibility only to be achieved in heaven, doesn't it? But that word "perfect" needs to be understood. Some translate it "mature" or "fully developed". Essentially it means that something conforms to the standard set for it. It is used of sacrificial animals which were to be without blemish or fault. But a "perfect" sheep is very different to a "perfect" dove or a "perfect" cow. There are different standards for different animals and even the same animal in different stages of life. A "perfect" lamb is very different to a "perfect" ram! I believe the same is true for us in our relationship with God. A child can have a "perfect" relationship with Christ if he or she follows Him to the full extent of their understanding. Something different is expected, of course, from an adult. An adult with a "perfect" relationship with Christ will require a more mature understanding and a deeper walk with Him. Likewise, God has different expectations of a new Christian and one who has walked with Him for many years. And I believe that someone with Alzheimer's or who faces other mental challenges can have a "perfect" relationship with Christ if their walk with Him faithfully reflects their understanding. You see, our relationship with God is about a heart turned towards God and open to Him, allowing His presence to fill and change us. This is possible at for anyone and at any stage of life. We can have a "perfect" relationship with Christ here in earth if we are fully open to His presence in our lives and seek to walk with Him as best as we know how. Of course, we will all know Him perfectly and follow Him fully one day in heaven, but we can know this substantially now. This is the goal towards which Paul is willing to work hard and suffer tribulations. This is what He believes is so important.

- All in Christ (2:2-3)

In the second paragraph, we see that Paul wants them to know that everything is to be found in Christ. In Christ, they will find everything they need because in Him are *"all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"*. Everything needed for salvation is found in Christ. Later in chapter two, Paul is going to counter the message of some who would deceive them by

insisting that only some people can know true salvation – those who have had a special experience or know the right people or follow special rules or know special things. Paul works hard so that they will come to understand and trust that everything needed for salvation is found completely and exclusively in Christ.

Why is this so important to Paul? Firstly, He says, *“I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love.”* As they are united to Christ, they will be united to each other and together they will grow in Christ. This unity is one of the signs of the presence, the glory, of God. Jesus says, *“I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. ... May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.”* (John 17:21,23) It is Christ in us that makes it possible for us to operate in unity and to overcome the sinful behaviours which push us apart. His is the love which binds us together.

Secondly, Paul says, *“I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God’s mysterious plan, which is Christ himself.”* Understanding brings the confidence needed to stand firm against those who will try to pull them away from Christ. It is this confidence which gives us the anchor in Christ that prevents us from drifting away as we saw last time.

An Encouraging Motive (2:4,5)

Paul finishes up this section on a very positive note: *“Though I am far away from you, my heart is with you.”* We who have family far away know what this is like! Distance doesn’t diminish the love we have for our families does it? This is Paul’s pastoral heart for them. God has given Him a deep love for them and he wants the very best for them and he knows that is found in Christ.

We can hear his pride in them: *“I rejoice that you are living as you should and that your faith in Christ is strong.”* They are doing a good job! But we also hear his concern for them: *“I am telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments.”* They are not deceived now, but they could be in the future. As one commentator has said, Paul is seeking to give them “a vaccination against heresy, not a treatment for an infection.”

For us ...

So as we apply this to our own lives, what do we need to remember?

Paul’s primary message in this passage is that **our focus must always be on Christ**. We must not allow anything to take His place in our lives. Paul has emphasised the importance of this by explaining how hard he is working to convey this message. He is willing to give his whole life to it. In a couple of weeks we will look at some of the specific threats that the Colossians faced and how they might still face us today. For now, however, it is helpful to grab a hold of the fact that Christ is in us and that is all we need to experience the glorious presence of God. We often look for things to help us in our Christian life – things such as Bible reading and prayer, fasting, solitude, communion, singing, etc. All of these things can be helpful. But we need to remember that they are only means to an end. None of these things, in and of themselves, will save us or make us better Christians. All they can do is point us to Christ, the source of our salvation. He is in us and He is all we need.

This is Paul’s primary message in this passage. However, I think there are a couple of other things it is helpful to take away from our study. Firstly, I am encouraged as I realise that a “perfect” relationship with Christ is possible this side of heaven. This will look different in

every person and in every stage of life. “Perfect” for an adult is different than “perfect” for a child. It is different for a young mother and for an elderly man in aged care. What is key is our heart attitude. Is our heart turned towards God and open for his work in us? Have we allowed Christ’s indwelling presence to change us and shape us into His likeness? Are we walking with Him to the best of our understanding and seeking His cleansing and forgiveness when we stumble or fall? It is our heart which is key.

Finally, I think that this passage is a reminder to pray for those we know who serve in any kind of ministry. That includes our ministry partners here and overseas. It includes those among us who preach, lead the Grace Groups and other ministries of the church. I know I need your prayers! As Paul has talked about his ministry, it has given us a glimpse of the reality of what it involves. We can be praying that those in ministry will (1) stay firm in the face of Satan’s attacks; (2) find strength in Christ even though they must fight agonising battles at times; and (3) remain focused on Christ above all. There is always the temptation to find some new program or technique to make the work easier or simpler. However, these can never take the place of Christ – in ministry or life.