

Colossians 1:24 – 2:5

²⁴Now I am rejoicing in the sufferings for your benefit, and I am filling up the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for the benefit of his body, which is the church, ²⁵of which I became a servant according to the administration from God which was given to me to fill up to you the word of God, ²⁶the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations – but now is revealed to his saints, ²⁷to whom God wanted to make known what is the wealth of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory; ²⁸him we are proclaiming as we are instructing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, in order that we might present every person complete in Christ; ²⁹to [this end] also I am toiling as I exert myself according to his working which is being worked in me with power.

^{2:1}For I want you to know how great a struggle I am having for the benefit of you and of those in Laodicea and all who have not seen my face in flesh, ²in order that their hearts may be encouraged while being brought together in love and into all wealth of the fullness of understanding, into knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴This I am saying, in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive talk. ⁵For even if I am absent in the flesh, in the spirit I am with you, rejoicing and seeing your order and the solidness of your faith in Christ.

Context

Paul is writing to a group of Christians he has never personally met. The people who became the Christian congregation in Colosse learned the gospel from Epaphras, whom Paul describes as a dear fellow servant of the apostles and a faithful minister of Christ. At the time Paul wrote this letter, Epaphras was not in Colosse but with Paul, who was currently in prison, presumably in Rome. One of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was to vouch for Epaphras and for Epaphras' gospel ministry among the Colossians.

The Colossians were in danger of being influenced by men who were polluting the gospel. The polluters wanted the Colossians to accept a list of restrictions on their way of life. Those restrictions on what they ate and how and when they worshiped were advertised as a way to greater spirituality. Paul saw through such deception and perceived how it inevitably diminishes Christ. So Paul wrote a letter to emphasize for the Colossians the complete sufficiency of Christ—both Christ's person and Christ's work—for their holiness before God.

Paul began the letter with thanksgiving and prayer. Then in 1:14-20 he gave an extensive exposition of the Son, the Son's work of creation, and especially the Son's work of redemption. In 1:21-23 Paul reminded the Colossians that the Son had reconciled them to God. He stressed to them the importance of remaining in the faith and not being shifted away from the gospel. Paul declared himself to be a servant of that gospel. Now in 1:24 – 2:5 he describes why he rejoices to serve the gospel cause even though it means he must suffer and toil while he serves.

verse 24

Paul is glad to suffer for the sake of the church.

²⁴Νῦν χαίρω ἐν τοῖς παθήμασιν ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, καὶ ἀνταναπληρῶ τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν θλίψεων τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν τῇ σαρκί μου ὑπὲρ τοῦ σώματος αὐτοῦ, ὃ ἐστὶν ἡ ἐκκλησία

²⁴*Now I am rejoicing in the sufferings for your benefit, and I am filling up the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for the benefit of his body, which is the church*

We usually associate gladness and joy with freedom from pain and suffering. Paul surprisingly says he experienced gladness and joy when he went through pain and suffering. These are not the musings of a man with a psychological disorder. Nor are these the ambitions of a man who sees current sufferings as a way to redeem for a criminal past. These are the honest thoughts of an experienced gospel minister. He has learned what the first apostles learned when they rejoiced (χαίροντες) to be counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name in Acts 4. The first apostles and later the apostle Paul all learned to appreciate the truth of their Lord's words: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice (χαίρετε) and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." How joyful to be so associated with Christ that an unbelieving world treats you like it treated him!

When Paul wrote to the Colossians, his current suffering was imprisonment (4:3 and 4:18). Acts 28 describes Paul's imprisonment in Rome. He stayed in a place at his own expense. Though he could welcome people who came to see him, he was not a free man. He was kept under surveillance (possibly even physically chained with something like an ancient tether) until he could appear for trial before the authorities.

Paul's current suffering was only the latest in a long list of miseries. Acts 9 and Acts 13-28 reveal the many intense sufferings Paul experienced through years of gospel ministry up to his house arrest in Rome. And many more sufferings were still to come! Sufferings are not pleasant. We will grant some poetic license to the hymn writer who said, "Go, then, earthly fame and treasure! Come, disaster, scorn, and pain! In your service pain is pleasure..." (CW 465:3). That's poetry, but real life pain stinks. So why was Paul now rejoicing in his present sufferings?

The answer is found in a little prepositional phrase: ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν. If you think that Paul suffered to make a name for himself, or if you think that Paul suffered so that he could be worshiped and glorified by other human beings (including us), you would be wrong. "For your sake," or even better, "*For your benefit*," is the way Paul put it. Paul was suffering so that the Colossians would be benefited—and he had never even met them! You can brood over the question, "How are the apparent setbacks in ministry benefiting me?" Or, you can rejoice over the fact that somehow the current setbacks sent into your life and ministry by a gracious Lord are meant to benefit others.

What Paul went through for the benefit of the Colossians specifically, he went through for the benefit of Christians generally. Paul uses a curious expression when he says, "*I am filling up the things lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh*." What does that mean? Paul does not mean to say that Christ's work, particularly his suffering and death, is in any way deficient. In fact, throughout the letter Paul emphasizes to the Colossians how all-sufficient Christ's redeeming and reconciling work is. "In him [the Son] we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (1:14). "God was pleased through him [the Son] to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (1:20). "God has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his

sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (1:22). When the Son of God said from the cross, “It is finished,” it was finished.

But there is a sense in which Christ’s sufferings do continue. In Matthew 10 Jesus taught that we Christians must take our crosses, follow him, and be ready to be treated and mistreated like him. In 2 Corinthians 1:5 Paul uses an expression similar to Colossians 1:24 when he says, “The sufferings of Christ abound to us.” Christ suffered to make the gospel and put it into effect. Christians are afflicted as they tell the gospel about Christ. As long as the world keeps spinning, there are more afflictions to be experienced by Christians in their service to the gospel. Christians are going to feel the pressure. The pressure can be physical, mental, spiritual, any combination of those three, or all three combined. But isn’t it comforting to know that these afflictions which Christians experience are called *the afflictions of Christ*? Remember that Paul had once been on the wrong side, persecuting the church. With his eyes suddenly blinded on the road to Damascus, his ears heard the pointed question from the Lord Jesus, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” Christians suffer because of their connection to Christ, and the concerned Savior feels their pain. “All my wants to him are known; all my sorrows are his own,” we sing (CW 385:4). By the grace of God, Paul learned to sing the essence of those words, too. Being stoned and flogged and beaten must have left their marks on the flesh of Paul, but every mark on the missionary’s body bore the Lord’s Jesus personal stamp of “mine.”

Paul bore those scars *for the benefit of Christ’s body, which is the church*. In 1:18 Paul called Christ “the head of the body, the church.” There is an intimate connection between Christ and Christians, as organically intimate as your own head with the rest of your body. Paul viewed the body, the church, as all those who had been called to faith in Christ plus all those who would be called to faith in Christ through the preaching of the gospel. By the power of the gospel, many had been converted to faith in Christ through Paul’s gospel service. Paul was confident that the power of the gospel would convert more.

We have benefited from Paul’s gospel service so many centuries ago. It was a difficult road for Paul personally. But through Paul, God has taught us about Christ, about our redemption and reconciliation and the remission of our sins, about our baptism, about our new life in Christ, about our hope of eternal life by faith alone in Christ alone. On top of that, God has used Paul to teach us what the gospel ministry is all about. And on top of that, God is still using Paul to teach us about enduring the sufferings and afflictions that come along with the desire to be a faithful servant of Christ. Paul had no idea what God would specifically accomplish in your life and mine through him. He simply trusted that God was using the pain and pleasure of gospel ministry to benefit Christians now and Christians in the future.

What scars do you carry for the sake of Christ’s church? I would guess that most if not all of the scars we carry from ministry are invisible to each other. There may be some physical scars, but more of them are probably mental and spiritual. On days of reflection, what do you think of them? What really hurt about them? What still really hurts about them? What was the point of them all? What did they do for you? Even more, what might they be doing for others? What might they do for someone beyond your time and place? Often the benefits of the difficulties endured by gospel ministers go way beyond what they can calculate at the time. But we trust that our scars which Christ calls his own will benefit the church.

This is the long view of ministry that encourages a young home missionary to keep going in establishing a congregation. His work, which involves some present affliction, will likely end up benefiting people he will never meet nor personally shepherd. The long view of ministry encourages a seasoned pastor to hang in there when he has fightings and fears from within and without. God is using his work, by the power of gospel, to accomplish wonderful things under the sheep’s skin that the shepherd has no way to measure. The long view of ministry encourages a pastor on the way to retirement to keep teaching the young and baptizing the newborn even as he serves his final months and days in the ministry. He has learned something about the

church. It belongs to Christ. It is built by Christ. It will endure because of Christ. And if we suffer some things along the way as Christ lets us participate in that work, let us rejoice and be glad in it.

verse 25

Paul's ministry to the church is God's gift to him.

²⁵ ἧς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ

the church, ²⁵of which I became a servant according to the administration from God which was given to me to fill up to you the word of God

In verse 23 Paul called himself a servant of the gospel. Here he calls himself a servant of the church. The gospel minister serves both the gospel message and the people who like him need to hear the gospel message. Jesus set the pattern for service according to Mark 10:43-45: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (διάκονος)...for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve (διακονῆσαι), and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Jesus served by giving. In his case, he did what only he could do. He gave his life as a substitute death for sinners and freed us all from the eternal consequences of our sins. This is the gospel which Paul and every other minister of the gospel serves. Also for the gospel servant, service involves giving. He gives time and effort to search the Scriptures and learn the gospel better for himself. After all, he is a servant of the gospel. He also gives time and effort to bring the gospel to people so they may remain in Christian faith or be converted to Christian faith. After all, he is a servant of the church.

Paul did not become a servant by personal choice. The gospel ministry was a gift from God to Paul. God was the giver. Paul was the recipient. The gift is labeled as τὴν οἰκονομίαν. We could call it an “administration,” like the responsibility put on a house manager by the owner of the house. We could also call it a “commission,” like the assignment given a public official by the constitutional head of state. The gospel ministry is a huge responsibility. At the same time, though, Paul always thought of it as a gift. Paul had no entitlement mentality when it came to being a gospel servant. He was not entitled to be a missionary to the gentiles any more than you or I am entitled to be a pastor in our congregation or mission setting. Though we often refer to “my ministry,” let us never forget that the gospel ministry really belongs to God. We serve in it when and where we are able, qualified, and called. We also do well to remember Paul’s remark that he was given the ministry εἰς ὑμᾶς—*for you*, for people like the Colossian Christians. Note Paul’s sentence structure where he puts *to me* (dative) and *to you* (prepositional phrase) right next to each other, emphasizing that “God gave me a gift so I could give it to you.” Similarly, the gospel ministry is a gift to us through which God intends to benefit other people.

The administration, the commission given Paul was *to fill up to you the word of God*. Paul says something similar in Romans 15:19: “So I have filled up (πεπληρωκένα) the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem and around up to Illyricum.” In that context, “filling up the gospel” seems to mean spreading the gospel and making it known far and wide. In the case of the Colossians, Paul was spreading the gospel to them by pen instead of in person. “Filling up the word of God” in Colossians 1:25 can also include the thought that Paul was expanding on the gospel truth the Colossians had already learned from Epaphras. That thought seems to fit well with the upcoming verses. So, whether Paul was “filling up the word of God” to new places or “filling up the word of God” to new depths of insight, he was doing the work God had assigned to him. Thank God he has assigned us work to do, too. May we see it for the gift it is and then visit, preach, and teach with Christ-like service.

verse 26

God reveals what he kept hidden for a long time.

²⁶τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν,— νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ

²⁶*the mystery which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations – but now is revealed to his saints*

The mystery is an appositive referring back to *the word of God*. It's not that God's word is something murky, as though it should be a topic for that creepy show *In Search of...* hosted by Leonard Nimoy in the 1970's and early 1980's. This verse explains in what sense *the word of God* is a *mystery*: something was hidden, but then it was revealed. Nobody would ever figure out by brain power, nobody would ever discover through personal meditation the wonderful truths about Christ's person, Christ's work, and his significance for us as described in 1:15-23. We know these things only because God has told us about them through his apostles in his written word.

It is true that Old Testament prophets also revealed God's words to people in ancient times. Isaiah quoted God's saying, "I have revealed and saved and proclaimed" (43:12). It is true that Old Testament believers trusted in God's clear promise to send a Savior. Habakkuk the prophet's confession was, "I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (3:18). King David's confession of faith was, "[O LORD] you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" (Psalm 25). But it is also true that Jesus could tell his first disciples at the dawn of the New Testament age, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Luke 10:23-24). Old Testament prophets and kings saw God's saving plans revealed in shapes and outlines—like a sleek concept car wrapped in a cloak on the way to a Detroit auto show.

But now, Paul continues. Can't you sense the excitement in that expression? *But now!* It's the first day of the auto show. With lights positioned just so, with cameras set to flash, the head of the design time pulls the cloak off to reveal the shiny new auto in all its marvelous detail. *But now!* There is an excitement there we never want to lose when we approach God's revealed mysteries in the sacred Scriptures. We can only reveal them to others after we have had them revealed to us first. So whenever we spend time in the Scriptures as shepherds of the sheep, it's good for us to remember the old adage: "Apply yourself to the Word. Apply the Word to yourself. Then apply the Word to your hearers."

But now [the mystery] is revealed to his saints. *Saints* is an interesting word choice here because it expresses the end product of God's revealing and saving and proclaiming. Through it all, he brings an individual to faith and declares that person holy. Working backward, people are holy through faith, a faith given them through the revealing of God's mystery to them, according to a plan which God had from ancient times. Working forward, God had a plan to bring salvation, and he announced his plan in stages through the ages and generations, finally giving the full revelation in the New Testament, making sure his revelation was preached so that through it he would bring individual sinners to faith and declare them holy as his very own people. This is the way God works. It's essential for servants of the gospel and of the church to remember this.

verse 27

God desires that the saints know Christ.

27 οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης

27 to whom God wanted to make known what is the wealth of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory

This is a beautiful verse. It reveals to us God’s very heart. God wanted you to know his mystery. He wanted to tell you something very important, and he did everything in his power and grace to make it happen. What was his motive? Simply this: he wanted to.

It bears repeating. We would not know any of God’s mystery unless he wanted us to know it. In the previous verse Paul said the mystery was *revealed* (ἐφανερώθη). In this verse Paul says God wants *to make it known* (γνωρίσαι). The two concepts are similar. If we wanted to see a distinction, though, we could say that the revealing includes the birth of Christ along with the other major events in his life—his life, his suffering and death, his resurrection, his ascension. The making known is what followed the ascension of Christ—Pentecost, the spread of the gospel in Acts, and the proclamation of the gospel up to the current Sundays of the church year. God wanted all this making known to happen. That’s why it did. That’s why it still does.

Though Paul always maintained a heart to reach his own Jewish people, he was primarily a missionary to the Gentiles. Earlier in his life, while still a pharisaic Jew, Paul had been adamantly opposed to the gospel, a gospel that included Gentiles. But later in life, as a Christian man and servant of the gospel and the church, Paul could only praise God for how rich God had made the saints among the Gentiles. And God had used Paul to do it! Perhaps we have had an experience where we would not have specifically chosen to reach a certain group of people, but later we could only stand back and be amazed at what God accomplished through the gospel he drew out of our mouths.

What is the wealth of the glory of this mystery is an indirect question. It describes what God wants the saints to know. We naturally see wealth in terms of large bank accounts or extensive stock holdings. We naturally see glory in terms of military campaign ribbons and championship rings. But the mystery that God reveals gives us a whole new way of looking at wealth and glory. Wealth is not really what you can earn for yourself, and glory is not really what you can gain for yourself. In his mind’s eye Martin Luther stood at the cradle of Jesus Christ and came up with these thoughts: “Instead of soft and silken stuff you have but hay and straw so rough on which as King, so rich and great, to be enthroned in royal state. And so it pleases you to see this simple truth revealed to me: that all the world’s wealth, honor, might are weak and worthless in your sight” (CW 38:11,12). There is a true and lasting wealth which God desires to give his saints.

Paul finally names the mystery which is the source of the wealth. The revealed mystery is a person. It is *Christ*. Paul uses the Savior’s official title. *Christ*: he is the God-Man anointed by the Spirit in fullest measure. That title recalls his whole earthly life from his birth (“a Savior...he is Christ the Lord”) to his death (“Are you the Christ?”) and including his resurrection (“God made this Jesus both Lord and Christ”). Paul adds to *Christ* a little prepositional phrase with a lot of meaning: *Christ in you*. It would have been something had God just revealed his Christ. But God did even more. He actually gave Christ to the Colossians, just like he gave Christ to us! *In you* reminds us that Christ dwells within believers. Jesus taught in John 14:20, “You will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you.” Paul made it all personal when he claimed elsewhere in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Christ is always among us Christians and even dwells within us.

Just think of the wealth Christ brings along when he enters our lives! The wealth was detailed in the previous section, especially verses 14-20 and verse 22. Forgiveness of sins, redemption, reconciliation with God, peace through the Son's blood shed on the cross, holiness and blamelessness and irreproachability before God—Wow! That is what the Colossians and you and I have by faith in Christ, with Christ dwelling within us. That is being rich!

As if all that were not enough, there is more. *The hope of glory* describes the revealed mystery who is Christ. All the wealth we have in Christ right now—forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, peace, holiness and blamelessness and irreproachability—gives us hope for untold future wealth. *Glory* is a big word, and reading a book like Revelation gives us a view through sunshades of the glory that we will see with our own eyes after our Redeemer wakes us up on the last day. At present Christians suffer affliction. Consider the apostle Paul's situation as he wrote these words. Consider the reason why the Colossians needed this letter in the first place. Consider why we in the church need to hear these words today. But *glory* is coming! Christ is the sure hope that Christians are going to experience it.

verse 28

Christ is the theme of Paul's proclaiming.

²⁸ ὃν ἡμεῖς καταγγέλλομεν νουθετοῦντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον καὶ διδάσκοντες πάντα ἄνθρωπον ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ, ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ

²⁸*him we are proclaiming as we are instructing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom, in order that we might present every person complete in Christ*

The relative pronoun ὃν is placed first for emphasis as if to say, "Christ is the one we are proclaiming and Christ alone." When we preach something called the gospel, we are really preaching someone called Christ. Though the subject *we* is found in the verb, the personal pronoun ἡμεῖς is added. It seems to be emphatic and probably is, especially considering Paul's warning about false teachers in 2:4. The emphasis would read something like this: "*We*—that's me, Paul, and Epaphras and the rest of genuine gospel preachers, unlike the deceivers in your midst—*we* preach Christ." It's worth noting that preaching not only takes place from the pulpit in formal worship. An angel once preached to shepherds under a night sky and an angel once preached to a small group of women next to a garden tomb. Wherever and whenever we are meeting with groups, couples, and individuals and bringing them Christ, we are preaching in the sense of announcing and proclaiming.

Christ's command was to go to the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15). Paul took that command seriously. *We are instructing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom.* Note the emphasis by repetition of πάντα ἄνθρωπον. That is every human being, every man, woman, and child. Though we preach sermons to congregations and teach classes to groups, the ministry is often a very personal affair, done one by one. Who doesn't like to see oodles and masses of people show up for worship and education? Yet even then, the gospel servant's concern is for the individual out there. Just think of Jesus' time with Nicodemus, with the Samaritan woman at the well, with Mary Magdalene, with Peter. Just think of the many individual names mentioned by Paul at the end of his letters. He knew those individuals. He had dealt with them one-on-one. *We are instructing every person and teaching every person with all wisdom.* Here is encouragement for pastors of large congregations to remember the value of the individual human being. Here is encouragement for pastors of small congregations and young missions to remember the value of the individual human being. Instruct every person. Teach every person.

The present participles *instructing* and *teaching* are two activities in which Paul and his associates proclaim Christ. *Teaching* (διδάσκοντες) is pretty straightforward, though it bears repeating that teaching does not always have to take place in a formal academic setting. It happens in private conversations in homes and on sidewalks, in automobiles and at restaurants. *Instructing* (νουθετοῦντες) can also have the sense of earnest instruction to the point of admonishing and warning someone. When we warn someone about the mortal danger of his or her sin, we do it according to Christ's warning and in the interest of proclaiming Christ's grace. When we teach someone about God's forgiveness, we do it in connection with the death and resurrection of Christ. Whether warning or consoling, let it be done *with all wisdom*. We seek to teach and instruct in a wise way as Paul did, aware of where the individual is at. We also can be sure that when we are truly proclaiming Christ, we need never feel that we are somehow on the short end of the stick when it comes to wisdom. Paul will elaborate on that thought in 2:3.

ἵνα παραστήσωμεν πάντα ἄνθρωπον τέλειον ἐν Χριστῷ—Mark and star this purpose clause. It is really the heart and soul of Paul's driving ambition in the ministry. If you look at the schema I drew up for this exegesis, you see what an important clause this is in the whole context of 1:24 – 2:5. This is the purpose of Paul's proclaiming the mystery revealed by God. This is the purpose of all Paul's instructing and teaching. This is the reason why Paul toils and exerts himself and endures many a struggle. This is Paul's driving ambition in the ministry, and not only his, but the driving ambition of his associates too: *that we might present every person complete in Christ*.

And how ambitious it is! The emphatic repetition from the previous clause is back: πάντα ἄνθρωπον. This too was Christ's driving ambition in his ministry, an ambition instilled in him by his heavenly Father. "Your Father in heaven," Jesus told his disciples, "is not willing that any (ἐν) of these little ones should be lost" (Matthew 18:14). Finding the one wandering sheep was the cause of the shepherd's exuberance in Christ's parable. Losing any soul to unbelief was the cause of Christ's tears over Jerusalem. Let's remind ourselves that Christ died for the sin of the world. Because that is so, the ambition of gospel ministry is nothing less than the salvation of every single soul by faith in Christ, a faith which comes by hearing the message.

We can be well aware that not all will believe. We can be well aware that some who believe will fall away from faith. The parable of the sower is meant to teach us such things so we do not despair when we preach Christ but witness scorched flowers and strangled plants. We also can be well aware that we do not have the power within us to make one person believe any truth about Jesus Christ. We can preach, but we can't convert—can't convert ourselves, cannot convert anybody else. People come to faith and remain in faith only by the power of God working through his means. We can be well aware of all this, and should be well aware of it, but let's not make the ministry into just a cerebral, mechanical thing that lacks the drive and ambition of our new man in Christ.

I was once asked some questions by another pastor, and now I ask them of myself. When I prepare a lesson for a class, am I content with getting through the lesson? Or do I really want the people to get it? When I prepare a sermon, am I content with getting something on the page and something out of the pulpit on Sunday? Or do I really want that man in the front and that woman in the back and that teenager on the aisle to repent and believe the good news? When I am preparing an exegesis for conference, am I seeking to do my duty and maybe make it look decent in the process? Or do I really want to find encouragement for myself and bring some encouragement to my fellow pastors, that we find greater inspiration to carry out the ministry with the driving ambition of Paul, *that we might present every person complete in Christ*? After all, it is also the driving ambition of our Lord, who called us to this ministry, is it not?

The goal is to present every person *complete*. The word τέλειον says that a goal has been reached. Is *complete* a reference to our justified status before God? Certainly when 1:22 speaks of the reconciling death of Christ making us stand holy and blameless and irreproachable before God, that is a reference to our

justified status before God by which we are saved. Or is *complete* a reference to our justification by faith plus also a completeness in sanctified knowledge and sanctified living? Certainly Epaphras' prayer for the Colossians in 4:12—that the Colossians stand *complete* (τέλειοι) and fulfilled in all the will of God—includes a desire for their full maturity in knowledge and holy living. In Philippians, another prison letter probably written around the time of Colossians, Paul mentions that he has not already been made complete (τετελείωμαι), but he forgets what is behind and presses on toward what is ahead. He pursues the goal and its prize, all the while knowing that the only righteousness worth having is the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith in Christ. After saying this, Paul comments that all of us who are mature (τέλειοι) should think this way. So a mature Christian in this life is fully aware that he is not mature in the fullest sense of that word. He knows he is completely justified right now through the righteousness of Christ credited to him by God. He also knows there is room for improvement in his thinking and in his living. Until we are completely mature in our knowledge of God and in our living according to his will, and until the people we serve are completely mature in knowing God and living according to his will, the ministry continues. There is still a goal to reach.

The only way any of it happens is *in Christ*. Only in connection with Christ can anybody be said to be *complete*. Human history is one story after another about the attempt to build a new man apart from Christ. Just in recent memory, there was national socialism in Germany and communism in the Soviet Union, two attempts to build a new man that failed. There is American ideology, which is currently infatuated with trying to build a tolerant new man who approves a person of any (trans)gender and sexual orientation. Islam is still trying to build a new man through rigorous adherence to religious law, and Hinduism and Buddhism are still trying to build a new man through meditation and trying to be nice. All these religions and political ideals are simply carrying out what comes naturally to the human psyche, whether it is outwardly honorable, crassly hedonistic, or horribly violent. But none of them makes any person *complete*.

Paul's goal was *that we might present every person complete in Christ*. That again calls to mind the theme of Paul's letter. Christ is all-sufficient. If you want to warn a person about his sin, proclaim God's law in the spirit of Christ. If you want to save a person from sin, proclaim the crucified Christ to him, have him baptized into Christ. If you want to give a person hope, proclaim the risen Christ to him and set his heart on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. If you want to help a person live a holy life, proclaim the love of God in Christ to inspire a new heart, and proclaim the good commands that express the will of Christ to guide the new self. Make it your goal to *present every person complete in Christ*.

verse 29

Paul works hard to proclaim Christ.

²⁹ εἰς ὃ καὶ κοπιῶ ἀγωνιζόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ τὴν ἐνεργουμένην ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐν δυνάμει

²⁹to [this end] also I am toiling as I exert myself according to his working which is being worked in me with power

The beginning of this statement again highlights the previous purpose clause. That toward which (εἰς ὃ) Paul is working is the goal of presenting every person complete in Christ. Now in this verse he talks about how he works.

I am toiling. Paul is talking about effort and sweat and fatigue. *Toiling* is the kind of word used for commercial fishing (Luke 5:5) and field work (4:38), which of course are fitting images, considering that gospel ministers fish for people and work toward the Lord's harvest. The ministry takes effort!

The ongoing nature of the effort is stressed with the present participle ἀγωνιζόμενος. The middle tense may be a true middle in the sense of being reflexive: *I exert myself*. Paul is using athletic imagery. This is not sitting around a table on game night to play Monopoly. This is engaging in an Olympic wrestling match for the gold medal. Think of the discipline and sacrifice and persistence along the way needed for a task like that. Think of the discipline involved in the ministry. For example, how do I use my time? Think of the sacrifice that comes with the ministry. For example, what do I need to eliminate from my life to keep myself focused on the tasks at hand? Think of the persistence needed in the ministry. For example, what pain and difficulty am I going to have to fight through? Or what can I do to improve my work and my witness?

Generators are essential to getting things going. Have you ever looked at an aircraft and wondered how that thing gets started in the first place? Other than turning the key, do you know how your car gets started, whether it's 110 degrees or 10 below zero? We push a button on a computer and expect it to instantly boot up, but how does it do that? We may not need to know the complete answers to those questions, but if we are going to toil and exert ourselves in the ministry for any length of days, we better be able to answer a different question: What generates a man for gospel ministry?

Paul readily admits it. He was not a self-made man who was simply able to commit and discipline himself to be such a great gospel worker. Not at all. The toil and exertion Paul did was in line with the working which Christ was doing in Paul. Paul did not generate the energy. Christ did. And what an energetic source Christ was! Christ was energetically working in Paul *with power*. To this day we are amazed at what Christ accomplished within and through Paul all the way from Acts 8 and 9 through 2 Timothy 4. Paul knew what his generator was.

There can be any number of reasons why we lose energy for the ministry. The reason can be physical or emotional or mental. That's why it is important for us to take care of our bodies and minds even as we exert ourselves in ministry. We do need exercise and rest and recuperation. The reason why we lose energy for the ministry can also be spiritual. A wrestler training for the Olympics has to eat, and he has to eat right. Ministers need to eat a lot of spiritual food, and they need to eat right. Interestingly, the generator for gospel ministry is...the gospel of Jesus Christ. We know this. So isn't there something to be said for continuing to devote ourselves to the study of the gospel? Through the gospel Christ generates an energetic gospel ministry in a man and out of a man.

chapter 2, verse 1

Paul struggles for people he has never met.

^{2:1}Θέλω γὰρ ὑμᾶς εἰδέναι ἡλικὸν ἀγῶνα ἔχω ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν ἐν Λαοδικείᾳ καὶ ὅσοι οὐχ ἑώρακαν τὸ πρόσωπόν μου ἐν σαρκί

^{2:1}*For I want you to know how great a struggle I am having for the benefit of you and of those in Laodicea and all who have not seen my face in flesh*

There is a reason why Paul was talking about his effort and struggle in the previous verse, and it was not to toot his own horn. He wanted the Colossians to know that he was struggling for them—ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν, *for your benefit*. The struggle was also for those in Laodicea. Laodicea and Colosse were towns in Asia Minor about 100 miles inland from both the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas. Laodicea is also one of the seven churches addressed in Revelation. Together with Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colosse were the places where Epaphras served Christian congregations (4:13). All three towns were within about 30 miles of each other. Paul's struggle was also for *all who have not seen my face in flesh*. Paul was treating the Christians in these

cities the same way he would treat any Christians in any place even though he had never met them personally. Paul was concerned about Christians everywhere.

What was the *great struggle* he was having for them? Yes, Paul's imprisonment was certainly a struggle, and it would encourage Christians far away when they heard of Paul's firm stand on the gospel. Chapter four gives another clue about what kind of struggle Paul was having for the Colossians. There Paul talks about the struggle Epaphras was having for the Colossians: "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you (πάντοτε αγωνιζόμενος ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐν ταῖς προσευχαῖς), that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured" (4:13). Both 4:13 and 2:1 use similar language. Paul was having the same struggle for the Colossians which their local pastor was having for them. Paul was deeply concerned about them. Especially heavy on his heart was the present danger that the Colossians would be shifted away from the gospel by the men who were trying to pollute it. So Paul's struggle included earnest prayer on their behalf.

Today's information explosion has exposed to us the difficulties Christian face throughout the modern world. We hear reports of the false teachings that try to elbow out the gospel. Indeed, we can read many of those false teachings published on the internet! We see still shots and moving videos that record the persecutions violently directed at Christians. These things affect us. These things affect the people we serve. I'm sure people from your congregations have requested prayers for Christians in peril throughout the world just like people from our congregation have done. It's good that we struggle in prayer for fellow Christians. We pray that God gives them a clear confession of Christian faith, that he prevents them from being influenced by false teachers, that he protects them when they are persecuted, and that he keeps them in Christian faith until we all see the Lord face to face. May God do the same for us!

verse 2

Paul prays for the encouragement of fellow Christians.

²ἵνα παρακληθῶσιν αἱ καρδίαι αὐτῶν, συμβιβασθέντες ἐν ἀγάπῃ καὶ εἰς πᾶν πλοῦτος τῆς πληροφορίας τῆς συνέσεως, εἰς ἐπίγνωσιν τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ θεοῦ, Χριστοῦ

²*in order that their hearts may be encouraged while being brought together in love and into all wealth of the fullness of understanding, into knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ*

We often hear, "I am praying for you." We probably say it a lot too. It's encouraging to hear from a person that he or she is praying for you. It's encouraging to tell someone that you are praying for him or her. It's even more encouraging to hear or to tell what the prayer is *for*. Paul is such a good example of this. He tells people he is praying for them, reveals to them the content of his prayer, and in so doing, often ends up preaching the gospel to them in the process. This is a good approach for us to take. It may be especially helpful for our hurried pace of life when it is difficult to get into extended conversations with people. It is also an approach that works very well in handwritten cards.

Paul prayed *that their hearts may be encouraged*. The participle *brought together* describes the encouragement Paul desired for them. There is encouragement in being *brought together in love*. False doctrine threatens to divide Christians. Pressure from an unbelieving world threatens to divide Christians. Problems within congregations threaten to divide Christians. How many people have you known who became disaffected and left the congregation? Christians need mutual love. Jesus encouraged and commanded this. Knowing his disciples would soon be without his visible presence, knowing the pressures that would threaten to divide them, Jesus emphasized they would need one another all the more. So the night before his death he said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must

love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35).

There is also encouragement in being *brought together into all wealth of fullness of understanding*. I assume that people attend Bible study because they want to be encouraged. An individual at Bible study gets encouraged by learning more and having truths solidified personally. Individuals at Bible study get encouragement just from the time they are spending with brothers and sisters in the Lord. But the most encouraging thing at Bible study is that people are being *brought together into all wealth of fullness of understanding*. The pastor has mined new gems for himself through his preparation. The veteran laypeople pick up new nuggets of understanding. A person newer to class learns a whole new concept and begins to realize what a store of wealth is found in the sacred Scriptures. And all these people of God are doing this together. Now that’s encouraging!

Finally, there is encouragement in being *brought together into knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ*. When it comes to knowledge, more than what you know, it is who you know. Paul repeats the thought he had in 1:27. He names God’s mystery: it is *Christ*. Paul’s prayer for encouragement is still being answered. You and I have been brought together to know Christ. The more we think about that fact, the more encouraged we are.

verse 3

Christ has all the treasures of wisdom.

³ ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοι

³*in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*

This verse makes you think of Jesus’ treasure parables in Matthew 13. “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.” We are in Christ’s kingdom by the grace of God. Paul reminds us of that in Colossians 1:13-14: “The Father has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” We know Christ, we are in his kingdom, we have forgiveness of sins. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are now ours to explore.

Just think of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge we have in Christ.

Space scientists send probes out of the atmosphere with the hope of finding somewhere the answer to the origin of life. We know that Christ created all things: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. All things were created by him and for him, just like Paul revealed to us in Colossians 1:16.

Theological philosophers write and debate about the true nature and identity of God. We know that Christ is God. In Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form, just like Paul revealed to us in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9.

Transcendental meditation gurus seek peace within. We know that we have peace with God through Christ’s blood, shed on the cross (1:20). We know to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts (3:15).

Rationalist preachers deny the supernatural and leave human beings to measure all things by what they see and think and feel. We know that Christ is the firstborn from the dead (1:18). We know that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. We know that when Christ, who is our life, appears, then we also will appear with him in glory (3:4).

Pop icons loudly preach a love that tolerates most everyone's behavior and judges almost nothing as sinful because all human beings should be free to express themselves however they choose. We know what it means to be God's people holy and dearly loved, and so we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. And over all these virtues we put on love (3:12,14). And we know what our purpose in life is because Paul revealed it to us in Colossians: "Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (3:17).

Those are some of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden in Christ. Thank God he has revealed them to us. Pray he reveals them to many other people. Work, preach, and teach to make it happen.

verse 4

Paul does not want people to be deceived.

⁴ τοῦτο λέγω ἵνα μηδεὶς ὑμᾶς παραλογίζηται ἐν πιθανολογίᾳ

⁴*This I am saying, in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive talk*

Paul knew exactly what he was writing against. We do not because there is no addendum to the letter that outlines the teachings of the so-called Colossian heretics. But from what Paul writes in his letter, we get a general idea of what they were saying. They denied that Jesus Christ is true God, equal to the Father. They stressed that Old Testament ceremonial laws must be kept. They added rules of their own making and imposed them on other people. They worshiped angels. They promoted themselves. They claimed visions for what they were saying. Paul said they were just acting according to the thinking of their flesh (2:18). Paul called their teachings philosophy and empty deceit and human tradition (2:8).

Here in 2:4 Paul calls the heresy πιθανολογία. That is "persuasive speech." Quite frankly, false teachings often sound plausible. They make some sense to our darkened natural minds. Does it make sense to our flesh that God would become a man? Human conceptions have man being or becoming a god, not God becoming a man. Does it make sense to our flesh that the way to God is by faith in Jesus? Human conceptions always have us working our way toward God's favor, not God reconciling us to himself by the death of his Son. The flesh likes to depend on itself and will make up its own rules to stroke its own ego. The flesh will seek out the supernatural by any means other than by sticking its nose in the Word of God. So when false teachers, who probably do believe what they are saying, bring false teachings, which sound good, that's πιθανολογία.

Paul did not want his readers to be duped. He did not want them to be cheated out of the wonderful prize that they already had in Christ. So he countered the heresies and retaught the gospel. Christian love for people's souls put him into action. He told the Colossians about his sufferings and his toils and his prayers and the purpose of it all— *that we might present every person complete in Christ*—so the Colossians would not leave Christ!

Jesus told us there would be many false teachers until the end of time, and he added that many people will be deceived by them. May we not be among them, neither the deceivers nor the deceived! Roman Catholic justification (faith in Christ plus a new life of charity) is persuasive. Any teaching in any denomination or non-denomination that diminishes Christ and promotes man's performance testifies to how persuasive Roman Catholic justification is. Mormonism is persuasive ("You can become god") just like Hinduism is persuasive ("god is within you"). Perhaps the most persuasive of them all is Islam ("Forget the 'Jesus is God' thing, just live a good life"). The persuasive nature of these religions is proved by the millions. But Paul puts Christ in front of us *in order that no one may deceive you with persuasive talk*.

verse 5

Paul rejoices over the Colossians' Christian faith.

⁵ εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῆ σαρκὶ ἄπειμι, ἀλλὰ τῷ πνεύματι σὺν ὑμῖν εἰμι, χαίρων καὶ βλέπων ὑμῶν τὴν τάξιν καὶ τὸ στερέωμα τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν πίστεως ὑμῶν

⁵*For even if I am absent in the flesh, in the spirit I am with you, rejoicing and seeing your order and the solidness of your faith in Christ*

The warning Paul sounded in verse 4 turns into a warm encouragement in verse 5. At the moment Paul's body could not be in Colosse or Laodicea or any place other than jail. But his thoughts, concerns, and prayers were free to float anywhere, and Paul wanted his readers to know that his spirit was with them. Paul was unabashed to express his emotions to other Christians, especially emotions of thankfulness and joy. He was joyful in jail because he was seeing from a distance what the Colossians were all about. No doubt Epaphras was telling Paul all about the Colossians, and Paul's ears translated the words to his mind's eye.

Paul was seeing the Colossians' *order*. An army under assault is in danger of falling apart. It takes discipline to stay together and meet the threat and win. Paul was happy to see that the Colossians were doing just that. They were not buckling under pressure. They were staying in ranks.

Paul was seeing *the solidness* of their *faith in Christ*. Thank God the false teachers in Colosse were running into a wall. Epaphras' faithful instruction was being proven for what it was. The faith God had given the Colossians was also being proven for what it was. Paul rejoiced over that.

We do well to stay positive and encouraging when fellow Christians are being put under pressure. They need to know that we are indeed thinking of them and praying for them. And when we hear they are remaining steadfast in their faith in Christ, let's tell them how happy we are to hear it. After all, people's faith in Christ is the goal of the gospel ministry.