

Burdened for the Church

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[0:00] Two weeks ago, we finished Colossians chapter 1, and in the last verses of that chapter, we heard Paul describe his ministry.

! Paul talked about the long-hidden mystery now revealed to believers. The mystery is that Gentiles would be saved as fellow citizens and fellow heirs, members of the same body, with Jewish believers.

The mystery long-hidden but now revealed is that Gentiles and Jews are no longer two, but one new man, equal in every way, in Christ. We talked about how the Old Testament predicted the coming of the Messiah, but the idea that the Messiah would actually live in his redeemed church, which would be made up mostly of Gentiles, was not revealed in the Old Testament.

Believers, both Jew and Gentile, now possess the surpassing riches of Christ dwelling within them. And let's look at verses 28 and 29 of chapter 1 for review.

Paul said, Him, talking about Christ, we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

[1:23] For this I toil, struggling with all his energy, that he powerfully works within me. Tonight we'll cover the first seven verses of Colossians chapter 2.

And in those verses, Paul continues to write about his ministry. This time, though, he personalizes his message to speak of the burden he has for specific churches. Let's go ahead and read those first seven verses of Colossians 2.

Paul wrote, Paul takes the general truth about the servant of the gospel he outlined in verses 24 through 29 of chapter 1, and he applies it to the hearers of this letter that are gathered in Philemon's house in Colossae.

Of course, Tychicus likely is reading the letter to them because he's the one who brought it with him from Rome. The Colossians are strangers to Paul, but they're still beloved in the Lord.

Paul is always in great struggle, and that word translated great struggle is literally agony. So he's in agony on their behalf. And we see what the apostle was feeling and experiencing while serving the churches.

[3:19] And we see from this that Paul has a pastoral spirit. He also has deep pastoral care and pastoral commitment. And he also has conflict for the churches of Christ.

He has several goals for these believers, but we'll talk about these goals here. And he's not only talking to the saints at Colossae, but also to the church at Laodicea.

So there are two churches he mentions specifically by name, but he has the same great struggle for both. And if Paul could be with us in person tonight, he would speak of having the same great struggle for Highland Park, too.

And we'll talk about why we can say that with confidence when we get into those verses. Perhaps the most necessary ingredient in the life of any minister of Jesus Christ is love for the church.

No one can truly serve God in the church without that motivation. We know that Jesus loved the church so much that he gave his life for it. Paul also had a deep love for the church, and he gave his life in service to the church.

[4:22] Paul loved the church because he loved Christ. He knew well the truth that's experienced in 1 John 4.21. And in 1 John 4.21, John wrote, As we go through the three sections of our text tonight, we'll see that Paul had specific goals for the church.

He desired for the Colossians to be strong in heart, united in love, settled in their understanding, walking in Christ, and overflowing with gratitude.

The first section of our lesson comes in verses 1 through 3. And in these verses, we see the reason for Paul's burden. So the reason for Paul's burden is our first section.

Listen to those three verses again. Paul wrote, You might notice that Paul's letter is becoming more intense here at this point.

He starts off by saying, For I want you to know. Obviously, he wanted them to know everything he'd written. Otherwise, he wouldn't have written all the other words before. But perhaps because he thinks this point is so important, he wants to make sure that they don't miss it.

[6:00] He wants the Colossians to know the struggle that he has for them, and also the believers at Laodicea. Struggle, again, translates the word from which we get our English word agony.

And it's a different form of the same word that he used in verse 129. So it's a similar type word, but it's a different form of it. And in 129, he spoke of his striving in the ministry.

Struggle pictures an athletic contest that's both strenuous and demanding. We know a little bit about Laodicea. Let's just remind ourselves of that. It was a city located in the Lycus Valley, about 10 miles downstream from Colossae.

It was founded by Antiochus II between 261 and 253 BC, and it was named for his wife. And it was a center of financial and banking operations and gladiator contest.

That's an interesting combination, isn't it? It suffered from frequent earthquakes, and it was desolated by them around AD 60, but it was rebuilt with the help of Roman finances.

[7:06] When Paul talks about his struggle, we know a little bit about what's involved in that struggle. Earnest prayer for these churches was certainly part of Paul's struggle. When we get to Colossians 4, we'll see Paul mention how Epaphras also struggles in prayer for the Colossians.

But what makes Paul's statement even more stunning is that he not even met the people for whom he prayed with such agonizing effort. He even says that they have not seen him face to face, yet he still is interceding on their behalf unceasingly.

We know that Epaphras, not Paul, brought the gospel to Colossae, but nothing could hinder Paul's prayers for these saints, and this ought to forever put to rest any excuse we have for not praying for people that we've never met.

The second strenuous activity that Paul has in mind here was mentioned back in verse 28 of chapter 1. He proclaims Christ, warning every person and teaching every person in all wisdom. And we know when a person does that well and does it correctly, that's very hard work. It brought Paul the suffering he spoke of back in verse 24 of chapter 1.

[8:22] We know that everywhere the proclamation of Christ is opposed with some hostility. Sometimes it's overt hostility and sometimes it's covert. But more than that, to hard work or to work hard at persuasion, at warning and careful instruction, is hard, hard work in itself.

And that's what he means when he says, I want you to know how great a struggle I have. So do you think Paul's trying to attract sympathy or admiration that he works so hard?

No, he certainly doesn't want to make himself look better than others or more committed than others. And he's not trying to provide a model for Christian ministry for other servants of the gospel. His point actually is a lot more important than that. Paul wants his readers to appreciate the way in which God is working to bring them to maturity in their Christian faith.

So in other words, he wants them to know for their own good. At the end of verse 1, we see why it's so important for us to study these verses.

[9:27] Paul says that his struggle and his message are for more than just the believers in Colossae and Laodicea. The end of verse 1 says that Paul struggled for all who have not seen me face to face.

That includes us, and that's why we know he would say these same words to believers in Highland Park or any other true church. Moving on to verse 2, Paul writes about what he is asking God to do for them.

The aim of this struggle, he says, is that your hearts would be encouraged. And this comes about as they're knit together one with another in love and mutual support.

So the intended result of this unity and affection is that they might experience a deeper assurance that comes from an increased understanding as well as a profound and life-changing knowledge of Jesus Christ himself.

Listen to verse 2 again. Paul says that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full understanding or full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ.

[10 : 36] So let's spend some time looking at verse 2 in more detail. Encouraged is from the same root as paracletos, which is used of the Holy Spirit several places in the New Testament.

Its basic meaning is to call alongside for help and encouragement. It was a metaphor from the Roman legal system. The concept of a defense lawyer comes from the same word.

And the word means more than simply to comfort. It means to strengthen or to fortify. So Paul has in view not so much the physical mistreatment they might face, but the heretical teaching and philosophical deception that could lead them away from the truth in Christ.

The Colossians we know were beset by false teachers, and that's why, in part, they needed strengthening. Paul tells his readers that he was struggling so that they would know the comfort and courage that knowing Christ would bring them.

The strengthening of the heart to stand firm and resolute when tempted by false teaching comes about only to the extent that they are knit together by their love for one another.

[11 : 47] So that's an important lesson for us as well. Love is the glue that binds and bonds their hearts to one another. As you might expect, the word translated knit together means to unite or bring together.

So the strengthened heart is one filled with love. And the same word refers in Ephesians 4.16 and Colossians 2.19 to the various parts that unite to form the human body.

Believers all share a common life with love as its basis. All believers possess the same eternal life. All come to Christ in the same way.

And all were placed into the body of Christ by the same Spirit. So believers are all one in Christ Jesus. We know that it's possible for a believer in isolation from others to grow in knowledge and assurance.

But that's not the way God intends for it to happen. Because there's a strange and elusive spiritual dynamic at work when Christian men and women commit themselves to the pursuit of the knowledge of God together.

[12 : 58] The insights we gain from each other, the accountability that we get, and the collective wisdom that's generated in the context of the local church all serve to enhance our growth in godliness and understanding in a way that can never be fully attained when we try to go it alone.

And we see that the result of encouraged and entwined hearts is full assurance and the knowledge of God's mystery. And of course, we know now that that mystery is Jesus.

Gaining the assurance of our faith and expanding the knowledge of Jesus are communal endeavors. Spiritual riches are reserved for those who encourage each other and have a strong commitment to the body of Christ.

At the end of verse 2, Paul defines those riches as the full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery. And full assurance is a very real possibility for us.

That means that we sometimes may still scratch our head and wonder if we really can make sense of a biblical statement. But it also tells us that we will know enough because there's a degree of certainty concerning the most basic and fundamental truths in Scripture.

[14 : 12] Our knowledge on this side will never be infallible or exhaustive, but it certainly can be sufficiently accurate and adequate to sustain our hope and energize our hearts to persevere in what God has called us to do.

There's great treasure in knowing that the gospel of Christ is true. And there's indescribable value in resting confidently in the truth of God's Word.

We also know that blessing and joy and peace fill the human heart when it attains the full assurance of all that God has made known of himself. Look closely again at Paul's words there.

He says he wants us to have the full assurance of understanding. And this could also be translated the full assurance that comes from understanding or unshakable confidence that's produced by knowledge or something similar to that.

The point here is that assurance is a function of knowledge. Our confidence in God's promises is subject in varying degrees depending upon the depth of understanding that we've attained in the knowledge of the things of God.

[15 : 24] Not everyone is equally confident about what God has revealed to us in Christ because not everyone is equally informed. Although we have full assurance of eternal life the moment we trust in Christ, our confidence grows and intensifies in direct proportion to our grasp of what God has revealed.

That's again why it's so important to study God's Word. So Paul stresses the need for his reader's understanding to include the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

And of course those words are at the very end of verse 2 and then on into verse 3. At the heart of this understanding, we need to have a settled conviction about Christ's deity and sufficiency.

In Christ himself, the hidden God was manifested to mankind. So in that sense, Christ is God's mystery revealed. He is, after all, the one on whom all things depend.

We saw that in verses 15 through 20 of chapter 1. And as we saw in verse 27 of chapter 1, Christ in you, talking about mostly Gentiles, is the hope of glory.

[16 : 42] Certain Old Testament books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastics speak about the wisdom human beings need to live in God's world, how difficult it is to find, and yet how precious it is.

For one example of that, listen to Job 28, verses 20 through 23. Again, this is Job 28, verses 20 through 23.

It says, From where, then, does wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air.

Evident and death say, We have heard a rumor of it with our ears. But verse 23 is the key here. It says, God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.

Now, Paul says, Here in the New Testament, the secret is out. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and understanding are in Christ. We can be sure that Paul never taught the Old Testament without proclaiming Christ at the same time.

[17 : 49] Paul never taught about the Christian life without talking about the centrality of Christ in that life. And Paul never taught an understanding of anything without Christ, because all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge and understanding are hidden in Christ.

And of course, when we first hear it, that claim is astonishing sounding. But as we follow the rest of this letter, we'll learn more about what this means.

We can suppose that he does not mean that once you know Christ, you automatically have all the answers to all of life's questions and challenges. If that were the case, then he wouldn't have had to write this letter in the first place.

But the wealth of wisdom and knowledge and understanding found in Christ is so vast that we can expect to be exploring it all our days as well. So we need to realize that the claim of the gospel of Christ is immense.

What philosophers have sought down through the centuries and what ordinary people have longed for, that is, of course, wisdom to live well, is all to be found in Christ.

[18 : 59] So Paul's point is that the true knowledge of the ultimate meaning of human existence is found only in light of the identity and redemptive accomplishment of Jesus Christ.

Insight into the character of God and his relationship with creation is found only by looking to the person and work of Jesus. The nature and eternal destiny of the human soul, the grounds on which we differentiate between good and evil, and the wisdom of God's ways in the world, as well as the pathway to reconciliation with God, are all tethered to Christ.

If we know Christ, then we will know those ways as well. Because Christ is sufficient, there's no need for the writings of any cult, philosophy, or psychology to supplement the Bible.

Christ is the source of all true spiritual knowledge. And that knowledge is also crucial because doubts about Christ's sufficiency bring doubts about his ability to do what he's promised to do.

So now that we've seen the reason for Paul's burden, let's move on to the next section of the passage. In verses 4 and 5, we see the rejoicing despite Paul's burden.

[20 : 14] So the rejoicing despite Paul's burden is what we'll look at next. Verses 4 and 5 say, I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. The gospel is the word of truth.

We learn that all the way back in verse 5 of chapter 1. The truth is that Christ is the one on whom all things, including us, depend on for our existence and our reconciliation.

We saw that in verses 15 through 23 of chapter 1. The blood of his cross is the power to heal creation. We saw that in verse 20. And Christ is the hope for the whole world.

That's something we looked at more recently in verse 27 of chapter 1. So to be turned away from the truth, this truth in particular is a massively serious danger.

[21:20] Think about this. Believers are not likely to be deceived by unimpressive arguments. It will take persuasive speech to perceive them. And so it's persuasive speech that they must be most cautious about.

Persuasive speech often sounds as though it's right. That's what makes it persuasive in the first place. But the more right it sounds, the more dangerous it is if it's not right.

The phrase I say this at the beginning of verse 4 is retrospective and looks back to what Paul has just written in verses 1 through 3 and maybe even what he wrote in the closing verses of chapter 1. The point is that Paul willingly suffers and preaches and teaches and agonizes in prayer so that these believers will not be led astray or deluded by plausible arguments or, in other words, clever and impressive speech that gives the appearance of being sophisticated and substantive without being true.

In reality, that kind of speech is false and destructive. And if you want an example of this sort of thing in our day, all you have to do is turn on most religious TV and wait.

[22:31] You're going to run across a lot of frightening examples in the course of just a few hours if you can make it that long before you shut it off. I wouldn't suggest spending too many hours watching most religious TV today.

But the basic attack of all false systems throughout history has been to deny either Christ's deity, his sufficiency to save and sanctify, or sometimes both.

Any group or person doing so is guilty of teaching the teachings of demons. And that is not just my statement. That comes from 1 Timothy 4, verse 1.

As purveyors of another gospel, they are accursed. We can learn that by looking at Galatians 1.8. And believers need to have a settled conviction about Christ's deity and sufficiency to be able to withstand the onslaught of false teaching.

That's why we need to recognize the true servant of the gospel who very often may not be the most impressive person in the room. Remember that the true servant of the gospel suffers.

[23:40] And the readers of this letter need to know and appreciate the labors that Paul does for them so that no one will deceive them with persuasive speech. Today we need to know and appreciate the labors of those servants of the gospel who labor for us, just like Paul did for the Colossians.

And we need to know that so we're not deceived by other persuasive speech. Having warned the Colossians to stand firm, Paul rejoices that they're doing so.

The beginning of verse 5 means much more than that he is with them in his thoughts. He is with them in the Spirit. In other words, he has heard of their love in the Spirit for all the saints.

We saw that way back in verse 4 of chapter 1 and also verse 8 of chapter 1. There's a bond that the Spirit creates between all who are in Christ, all who have joined the assembly of which Christ is the head.

And we learn that in verse 18 of chapter 1. And it's a bond that the distance between Colossae and Rome does not weaken. So being with them in that very real sense, Paul is rejoicing.

[24:47] He began this discussion of his role as a servant of the gospel in verse 24 of chapter 1 by saying that as a servant of the gospel, he rejoices in suffering for the sake of believers.

And now he finishes this section of the letter by returning to his note of joy. Now he tells us that he rejoices in the outcome of the struggles. And that outcome is the stable believers there in Colossae and Laodicea and other places where he has not met the believers face to face.

So Paul uses two words in verse 5 that few would employ today when they talk about Christianity because the words just aren't exciting enough for 21st century Christians.

In other words, there's not enough glitz and bling to these words because people like the Colossians could never raise enough money to subsidize a national television program.

And if you're into building a megachurch, you're going to need something more than good order and firmness in your faith. And good order and firmness are the two words that you don't hear used very often in Christianity today.

[25:58] But these words actually are words of high praise from Paul. Both good order and firmness are military terms. And maybe Paul gets this analogy because of his close contact with the Roman soldiers during his imprisonment.

The word translated good order refers to a line of soldiers drawn up for battle. It points to the well-ordered behavior of the Colossians.

Paul has in mind lives that are aligned with biblical revelation or daily habits of life that reflect the values of Jesus and also unwavering obedience to the will of God no matter how unpopular or unsuccessful they may prove to be.

Similarly, the word rendered firmness refers to the solidity of the formation of soldiers. It's used here to describe their faith and it means stable, steadfast, resolute, solid, not given to flights of fancy or open to the influence of flashy, fleshly preachers whose ministries are built on novelty and also built on sensational experiences or some new supposed revelatory word that is strangely absent from scripture.

Taken together, both good order and firmness express Paul's joy that individually and collectively the Colossians were standing firm against the attacks of false teaching.

[27 : 24] His goal for them is that they remain settled in their present true understanding and remain unyielding to doubt because of those attacks. So, so far we've seen the reason for Paul's burden and the rejoicing despite Paul's burden.

In the last two verses we look at tonight, we'll see the reminder in Paul's burden. So the reminder of Paul's burden is what comes in verses 6 and 7 and we'll see what that reminder is as we look at them.

He wrote, Therefore, as you receive Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him. Rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

The Colossians have received Christ Jesus the Lord. They have settled convictions about His deity and sufficiency and they're standing firm against the attacks of the false teachers and they need to continue to walk in Christ.

Once again, we see the familiar term walk and it refers to daily conduct. And in this context, it means primarily to continue believing the truth about Christ, not allowing understanding about Christ to waver.

[28 : 43] In broader terms, walking in Christ means living in union with Him. It means to maintain a lifestyle patterned after His. When faced with the dilemmas that Christians face in their daily lives, the guidelines should be what would Jesus do in this situation?

You know, sometimes we make light of the what would Jesus do movement that happened a few years ago. But in a lot of cases, that really is what we need to think about as long as we think about it seriously and sincerely.

Earlier in Colossians, we noted how Paul emphasized our future or the hope we have in Christ of inheriting and experiencing eternal and unchanging glory. But here in verses 6 and 7, the concern is the past and the present.

The New American Standard Bible provides a more literal translation of these verses, and it helps us see the connection that the past has to the present. So listen to verses 6 and 7 from the New American Standard.

That translation has these verses, Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed and overflowing with gratitude.

[30 : 06] So listen to verse 7 one more time to catch the difference. Paul says, Having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith.

So we have been firmly rooted in Christ and yet we're now being built up in Him. So do you hear the difference of the more literal translation there? So let's dig a little deeper into what Paul has to say in these verses.

The word received here is almost a technical term for receiving teaching that has been delivered to them. You received Christ when you heard the gospel and understood the grace of God in truth.

We learned that all the way back in verse 6 of chapter 1. It was not simply a matter of inviting Jesus into your heart. It was receiving the message about Him and believing it.

And this part is really important because it's more than just hearing the message. It's about receiving it and believing it. The New Testament also speaks of the tradition and the tradition is that which is received from those who went before and passed down or delivered it to others who in turn receive it.

[31 : 18] and then later pass it along themselves. The tradition in this New Testament sense is what Paul called in verse 1-5 the word of truth or the gospel.

From the very beginning the Christian faith has not been a matter of self-discovery or simply personal illumination. It's a matter of receiving something that is passed down or delivered to us. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11-23 Paul says, For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. And if you want to know what Paul delivered, we find that answer later in 1 Corinthians because verse 3-5 of chapter 15 say, For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.

And here's the answer. That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

So you see there that what Paul received and what he delivered is the gospel. And when we go back to Colossians 2-6, we see the phrase Christ Jesus the Lord, and it's an unusual phrase.

[32 : 39] literally, the Greek there says, the Christ, Jesus, the Lord. So this is what Paul summarizes when he says that they learned the gospel.

Jesus is the Christ, Jesus is the Lord. That's really two different things there. He's Lord and he's Christ, and that's a wonderful summary of the gospel that the Colossians heard and learned, and they also understood it when they received it.

And they're learning the full meaning and significance of that as they continue to grow in Christ. Paul reminded them earlier that they had heard and understood the grace of God in truth.

That was back in verse 6 of chapter 1. What they were taught about Jesus, who is both the Christ and the Lord, told them of the grace of God in truth.

So they must have learned, therefore, not just who Jesus is, but something about what he has done, particularly in his death. Epaphras could not have spoken of Christ Jesus the Lord without speaking of his resurrection and its significance.

[33 : 47] And in this word of truth, they had heard of the hope laid up for them in heaven. So all this is what the servant of the gospel teaches when he proclaims Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

And of course, that last part comes from verse 28 of chapter 1. Now says Paul, as you have received the Christ Jesus, the Lord, so walk in him.

As we go further into this letter, we'll look more at what it means to walk in him, especially when we get to chapter 3. But just as a preview, it includes such things as getting rid of sexual immorality, evil desires, covetousness, anger, malice, slander, obscene talk, and it also means showing kindness, showing patience, showing love, and demonstrating forgiveness.

It also means that husbands should love their wives and wives should submit to their husbands.

And we'll see all of that when we get to chapter 3. But like a tree with deep roots and rich soil, believers have been firmly rooted in Christ.

And that eternal planting in Christ took place at salvation. Christ then becomes the source of our spiritual nourishment, our spiritual growth, and the fruit that we produce.

[35 : 12] As we walk in Christ, we're now being built up in him, being made more and more like Christ Jesus as we go along. And by studying the word of his grace which is able to build you up, believers will grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

And those references come from Acts 20, 32 and 2 Peter 3, 18. And then Ephesians 4, 13 tells us that we will come to the measure of the full stature of the fullness of Christ.

So being firmly rooted in Christ and growing in him results in believers being established in their faith. Notice that the verses are in passive voice and so that indicates that it's God who will establish the believers.

So we have been firmly rooted in Christ and we are now being built up in him. Those facts themselves should be a source of comfort and a source of encouragement for us.

Those facts also should cause us to be thankful and of course that is what Paul says at the end of verse 7. So by taking in the word of the truth believers get a strong mind and then by living out those truths they receive full assurance that Christ is who he claimed to be.

[36 : 30] Assured of that they can appropriate the riches that are his legacy to believers and also walk in him. And as they walk in him they will grow in him and become established in their faith and the end result is that they will give praise to God.

So we are the believers that are the beneficiaries of the struggle that Paul speaks of in this section of scripture. As we read his letter we're the direct beneficiaries of his strenuous efforts to see Christ

known in all the nations.

For every advance of the gospel for every time we hear faith in Christ Jesus among the nations and for every person who continues in the faith stable and steadfast not shifting in the hope of the gospel we should thank God.

This is actually God's work and God is the one doing it. The struggles of Paul and the difficult toil of gospel servants everywhere are achieving their purpose because it's God's purpose and it's God's purpose to do it this way.

And that's why we should strive to live by the words of Colossians 2 6 and 7 and again that's where Paul says therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving.

[37 : 50] Thank you.