

VII. Hidden Treasure in Christ

March 31/April 1, 2010 Colossians 2:1-7

Aim: To commit to the Biblical faith regarding the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Lord, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and to walk in accordance with that faith.

A. Paul's Concern for the Church (Col. 2:1-5)

In these verses, there is a slight shift of emphasis as Paul explained his hopes for his readers and the reasons that prompted him to become involved in the situation that was developing in Colossae.

Paul's love for the church caused him to write his letter to the churches of the Lycus Valley (cp. 4:15-16). In Colossians 2:1-5 Paul states his specific concerns for the Colossian church. In expressing his concern, he models for us what and how our hearts ought to feel for the church.

1. Paul's Conflict (2:1)

'For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh.'

a) Agony

Verse 1 begins with a conjunction, *gar* ('for'), which connects 2:1 to 1:29, as Paul illustrates and elaborates his apostolic 'struggle.'

Paul again uses the noun *agōn* from which we get 'agony.' It is a different form of the same word he used in 1:29 to speak of his striving in the ministry. The word originally was derived from the place where the Greeks assembled for their Olympic games, a place where they agonized in wrestling and footraces, where they fought to win. As in 1:29, Paul characterizes his ministry as involving hard work, often in difficult circumstances, and against dedicated opponents. Paul had been agonizing, fighting for the Colossians with everything he had.

b) Lycus Valley Churches

Paul describes the conflict he has for three different groups of readers: members of the church of Colossae, 'those in Laodicea,' and others who had not seen his face 'in the flesh.' At this point, Paul was probably thinking of the believers in the nearby town of Hierapolis (cp. 4:13). Laodicea was an important town with a significant Jewish population, about twelve miles from Colossae.

These three towns were situated close to one another in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor, were in easy reach of each other, and were easily lumped together in the minds of people who lived in that region. The churches in each of the three towns had all been founded by the same evangelist, Epaphras, and were close enough for a considerable degree of mutual contact to have been likely. This closeness also made it likely that each church had been affected to some degree by the new teachers. As Paul addressed his letter to the Colossians, it was perhaps this church that was the one that was in the greatest danger.

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c) Conflict

What makes Paul's agony truly remarkable is that he had never once personally visited the Colossians or their neighboring churches. Aside from Epaphras, Philemon, and perhaps a few others he had met in Ephesus, he had never seen the Colossians. Why this strain for people he had never seen? Because he was God's 'chosen instrument' to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). But there was even more, for Paul and the Colossians shared the same relationship with Christ. He was also their spiritual father because he had won them through Epaphras. All of these elements contributed to his dynamic, agonizing struggle, and perhaps his persecution as well (cp. 2 Cor. 1:8). There was also the *agon* of labor (cp. 1 Th. 2:9; 2 Cor. 11:29). But most of all, he wrestled in prayer for them. That is where the real fight was, and is (cp. 4:12). Paul agonized in prayer for people he had never met. Paul's deep love for those he had not ever met reflects his love for Christ, the Head of the church.

Even though Paul had not been to any of the churches in person, he felt that he could not stand idly by as battle lines were drawn. In Colossae and the neighboring towns, the combatants were initially the new teachers on the one hand and Epaphras on the other, but once Paul heard what Epaphras was up against, he could not stand on the sidelines. The newcomers were trying to win the members of the three churches over to their cause. Paul was concerned to prevent this because he feared that it would entail long-term damage, with the churches being seduced away, not only from a certain style of Christianity, but in due course from the gospel itself. The same battle is going on in church after church today.

2. Paul's Concern (2:2-3)

Perceptive Christians have always known that the key to spiritual well-being is an increased knowledge and focus upon Christ.

a) Encouraged (2:2a)

'That their hearts may be encouraged ...'

The basic meaning of *parakaleō* ('encouraged') is 'to call alongside.' Because a person can be called alongside for many purposes, the word has a wide range of meanings. They include to entreat, appeal to, summon, comfort, exhort, or encourage. In the present context, however, it could be translated 'strengthen' because the Colossians were beset by false teachers and needed strengthening rather than comfort.

The word translated 'encouraged' was once used in secular Greek to describe what could happen in wartime if a regiment had become thoroughly dispirited, to the point where it had turned out to be unreliable and a doubtful asset in battle. Believers can be like that, sometimes losing all stomach for the fight. A situation that was potentially alarming could be transformed if a senior general came alongside the regiment and took the situation in hand, putting new heart into the dejected soldiers. In the same way, since Paul was under house arrest and could not come alongside the Colossian believers in person, he prayed that his letter might have the same effect, helping to stiffen the spiritual resolve of people whose vitality had been undermined.

When Paul expressed his desired that their hearts be strengthened, he was not referring just to their emotions. The strong tendency in modern English is to use heart with reference to the emotions, whereas in Scripture 'heart' designates the center of the personality, the source of willing and thinking in addition to feeling. Thus, it refers broadly to the inner person, the center of life, and often equates specifically to the mind (cp. Rev. 2:23; Jer. 17:9; Ps. 53:1). By their

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‘hearts’ he meant the innermost core of their being, the very center and focus of what made them the people they were. ‘Encouraged in heart’ is therefore a way of referring to an encouragement that touches the deepest part of our being and that affects every aspect of our persons.

The Spirit strengthens the hearts of those who yield their lives to His control. One of His names is ‘Helper’ (cp. Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). ‘Helper’ in the Greek is the noun form of *parakaleō* and could be translated ‘Strengthened’ in those passages. True inner strength only comes from being filled with the Spirit.

b) United (2:2a)

‘Being knit together in love ...’

The verb translated ‘knit’ (*syμβιβάζω*) means to unite or bring together, but it can also be rendered as ‘welded.’ This suggests that he envisaged an extremely strong bond. Paul clearly saw another danger threatening the church at Colossae. Error is divisive.

The irony of our present situation is that many modern believers have exactly the opposite perception to Paul. There is a widespread belief that doctrine divides. As a result, in some circles, there is an unspoken agreement that teaching should be kept to a minimum so as not to split the church. The church, however, is to be more than a club linking people with a shared set of tastes; it must unite around a shared set of convictions about Christ and His gospel.

A number of English versions, following the Greek literally, subordinate the verb ‘to encourage’; for example, ESV: that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love.’ But the Greek participle frequently adds a relatively distinct verbal idea to the verb it modifies, and this seems to be a case in point. Paul hopes that his ministry will both encourage these believers he has never met and foster unity among them at the same time.

This aorist participle explains that the main verb (‘may be encouraged’) by further defining the strengthened heart as one filled with love. Believers share a common life with love as its basis. That Christians display their unity in practice was Paul’s constant concern (cp. 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 1:27; 2:2; Eph. 4:3).

Understanding is facilitated when believers’ hearts are bound together in love. ‘Love’ is either the means by which unity is achieved or, more likely, the sphere in which the unity exists. This means that mere intellectual comprehension of the mystery of Christ will not bring full understanding of the mystery, for understanding also comes through the love of Christians one for another. How is this so? When we are loved by other believers, we experience Christ through them, and thus our knowledge of Christ is enhanced. No intellectual process will lead to a full grasp of the mystery of Christ unless it is accompanied by a love for him and for Christians that knits us, the Church, together in love. We cannot pursue knowledge of God in willful, unloving isolation, rejecting fellowship with others.

c) Assured (2:2a)

‘And attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding ...’

In the Greek, a *kai* (‘and’) precedes this phrase, raising the possibility that this clause is not dependent on the first part of the verse but parallel to it. The reference back to 1:9-10 is quite clear, as is the alliteration: *παν πλουτος τēs πληροφoρίας τēs συνεσεōs*. Paul is again piling up words in order to hammer home the truth that Christ, and Christ alone, is the source of every conceivable bit of spiritual knowledge worth having.

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Essentially Paul wanted his readers to regain complete confidence in the gospel because this had been shaken by the emphases of the new arrivals. Without that assurance, believers cannot enjoy all the blessings that are theirs in Christ.

Synesis ('understanding') refers to applying biblical principles to everyday life. When the believer experiences spiritual truth by living it, it becomes truly understood and leads to assurance of his or her salvation. The New Testament, then, concludes knowing the truth and acting on it leads to 'full assurance of understanding.'

d) *Mystery (2:2b)*

'To the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ ...'

The ultimate purpose of Paul's ministry, including this very letter to the Colossians, is that believers might 'know the mystery of God, namely, Christ.' The Greek text again confronts us with a series of three genitives. The first, *tou mystēriou* ('the mystery') indicates the object of the verbal noun 'knowledge.' The second is possessive: the mystery 'belongs to' God. The third is *Christou*. In the light of the very clear lead given us in 1:28, where the 'mystery' is defined as 'Christ in you,' we should construe *Christou* as an exegetical genitive dependent on 'mystery:' 'the mystery of God, namely, Christ.' Now, in light of the high Christology of 1:15-20, Paul makes 'the mystery of God' the object of that knowing and identifies that mystery with Christ.

In everyday English, a mystery (cp. 1:26-27) is something that we have to work out, an enigma, puzzle, or secret. By 'mystery' however, the apostle meant something that was once hidden and that we would not have known unless God had seen fit to reveal it. It was once a closed book; now it is an open secret. In the fullest sense, this 'mystery' is the gospel, God's way of salvation revealed in Jesus Christ. We would never have understood what salvation entailed without the coming of God's Son; it is through Him that God has revealed what we could never have discovered.

At the heart of 'understanding' they need to have a settled conviction about Christ's deity and sufficiency. In Christ Himself the hidden God was manifested to mankind. In the early church, as in our own day, it was vitally important to have a grasp on Christ's deity. No person can be a Christian at all without this true knowledge of Jesus Christ as the incarnate God. Yet so many Christians who affirm the deity of Christ live as if He were not the One in whom all spiritual sufficiency resides.

e) *Hidden Treasure (2:3)*

'In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

This verse is the Christological highpoint of the letter. It does not match the 'hymn' of 1:15-20 for exalted language in reference to Christ, but it expresses beautifully and compactly the cutting-edge Christological point that is Paul's driving concern: Christ is the one in whom is to be found *all* that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life pleasing to God. The all-encompassing nature of the knowledge to be found in Christ is highlighted by yet another occurrence of 'all' (*pas*) and by the use of the two terms 'wisdom' (*sophia*) and 'knowledge' (*gnōsis*). 'Wisdom,' of course, refers to practical knowledge, the ability to understand reality from God's perspective and to act on that understanding. 'Knowledge,' on the other hand, has a more intellectual focus.

Labeling 'wisdom and knowledge' as 'treasures' may reflect Old Testament wisdom tradition. Proverbs 2:1-8, for instance includes many of the key words that Paul uses in this and related

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texts in Colossians. Paul rarely uses the word ‘treasure’ (*thēsauros*, only elsewhere in 2 Cor. 4:7), making it even more likely that its presence here is owing to a reminiscence of this kind of wisdom teaching. They are ‘hidden’ in Christ in the sense that they are ‘treasures’ that have been deposited in Him and are now stored up in Him. Anyone who comes to know Christ by faith can draw from His store all the wisdom and knowledge that exists.

So when brotherly love is present and continuing, it facilitates a profound knowledge of Christ, which in turn results in wisdom and knowledge. This was a swing at the Gnostic heretics who claimed to have the way to wisdom and knowledge. Paul said there was (and is) no other treasury of knowledge apart from Christ.

This is aimed at the new teachers who urged that they could provide access to new and greater blessings over and above the blessings that mere conversion, and therefore union with Christ, could guarantee. But if ‘all the treasures’ are available to every believer in Christ as such, then there are no more blessings to be had beyond those that are available in Him. Those who listened to the new teachers would eventually find that their enjoyment and appreciation of Christ were subtly diminished, on the understanding that the true spiritual elite needed more than He could provide. Paul, by contrast, wanted his readers to be amazed at the greatness of Christ.

Jesus is the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He alone is sufficient. ‘Hidden’ is from *apokruphos*, from which we get the English word apocrypha. It was used by the heretics to refer to the writings containing their secret knowledge. But there is no hidden spiritual knowledge necessary to salvation and sanctification outside of Christ. The treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ, however, are hidden from all but Christians. Because Christ is sufficient, there is no need for the writings of any cult, philosophy, or psychology to supplement the Bible. He is the source of all true spiritual knowledge. That knowledge is also crucial to assurance because doubts about Christ’s sufficiency bring doubts about His ability to do what He promised.

Paul wanted God’s people to work hard at studying the Scriptures because only through a deep knowledge of the teaching and meaning of the Bible can anyone withstand the power of the ‘fine-sounding’ arguments of false teachers. The false teachers who had come to the region of Colossae maintained that they were bringing the people ‘full riches,’ ‘complete understanding’ of spiritual truths. But Paul reminded the Colossians that it is only as a person is ‘in Christ’ that the reality of these things are made known to him.

The heart of Paul’s concern was that the Colossians would grow ever more toward Christ. He was concerned for their minds, and that is why the bulk of the first chapter presents such a heady picture of Christ. But he was also concerned for their hearts, because the journey involved a heart’s love for Christ and fellow-believers.

3. Paul’s Fear (2:4)

‘Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.’

The transition between vv. 3 and 4 is abrupt, with no particle or conjunction linking the two verses. And for the first time, Paul warns explicitly about false teaching. ‘Persuasive words’ or ‘fine-sounding arguments’ translates a single Greek word (*pithanologia*), which has a neutral meaning. But the context here obviously requires a negative connotation. Plato associates *pithanologia* with ‘popular oratory’ and wars about accepting conclusions on this basis rather than on the basis of a ‘cogent proof.’ Paul has no doubt about the vital importance of spiritual

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truth, and he knows how perilously easy it is for believers to be led astray by high-flown rhetoric (or, in our day, by ‘multimedia presentations’).

The Gnostics’ clever arguments could easily lead astray those who were not knit together in brotherly love and thus fully enjoying the treasures of Christ’s wisdom and knowledge. The basic attack of all false systems throughout history has been to deny either Christ’s deity, His sufficiency to save and sanctify, or both. Believers need to have a settled conviction about Christ’s deity and sufficiency to be able to withstand the onslaughts of such false teaching.

Some commentators argue that Paul had his sights on a particular person in verse 4. This seems unlikely because he was not frightened to name names when this was necessary and no one person is singled out for mention here. It seems rather that Paul was concerned about a particular style, or approach, that had become the hallmark of the new teachers. It was not so much their arguments that troubled Paul as their presentational skills. The believers in Colossae had been confronted by a group of men who had proved very adept at making a potentially dangerous brand of teaching seem attractive. They were like our modern ‘spin doctors.’

Their arguments were not particularly effective, but they got under the guard of believers because they themselves seemed plausible. They are still with us. In some parts of the evangelical scene the leaders who attract attention are more notable for their star quality than their capacity for exegesis, more celebrated for their force of personality than the force of truth.

At the end of the day, a question needs to be faced. What drew people to align themselves with a particular teacher? Was it the drawing power of the Christ that He held up before them, or a pleasant manner and a well-honed technique?

4. Paul’s Joy (2:5)

a) *Absent in the Flesh (2:5a)*

‘For though I am absent in the flesh...’

In this verse, Paul meets another objection: he addresses the fact that he was a stranger to most of his readers in Colossae. Some might have raised the objection that the ongoing tussle for the identity of the three churches was none of his business. What gives Paul the right, under house arrest in Rome and far removed from the Colossians, to warn them and rebuke them? He was an outsider and a stranger.

b) *Present in Spirit (2:5a)*

‘Yet I am with you in spirit ...’

The answer is his presence with them ‘in spirit,’ which is set in contrast to his absence from them ‘in the flesh (*sarx*).’ This contrast with ‘body’ would naturally suggest that ‘spirit’ (*pneuma*) refers to the human spirit. However, it is doubtful whether Paul ever uses the language of ‘spirit’ without some reference to the Holy Spirit. Here, then, while the immediate reference may be, indeed, to Paul’s own ‘spirit,’ it is his spirit as taken up in the Holy Spirit. His ‘presence’ with the Colossians, then, is not a simple ‘you will be in my thoughts and prayers,’ but involves a profound corporate sense of identity, based on and mediated by the Spirit of God. It is on the basis of this union, effected in and by Christ and mediated by the Spirit, that Paul can address the Colossian Christians.

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The apostle sought to waylay their concerns. By saying that he was with the Colossian believers ‘in spirit,’ the apostle meant them to understand that he identified with them very strongly indeed. He felt at one with them in their longings, aspirations, and concerns. As they suffered because of the attacks of the evil teachers, he suffered with them. He used similar language in writing to the church at Corinth (cp. 1 Cor. 5:3-5).

Modern Christians can experience something similar. The gospel can create an immediate bond with people that we don’t know and have never met – for example, when we pray for believers who are undergoing persecution in other parts of the world. Even though we have not been introduced to them, they are our family.

c) Good Order and Steadfastness (2:5b)

‘Rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.’

‘Rejoicing to see’ translates two parallel Greek participles: *chairōn kai blepōn*, literally, ‘rejoicing and seeing.’ Paul’s seeing is accompanied by rejoicing.

At this point, the apostle commended the believers using two military terms, perhaps suggested by Paul’s close contact with Roman soldiers during his imprisonment (cp. Acts 28:16; Phil. 1:13). The first, *taxis*, translated ‘good order,’ describes the way that soldiers on the battlefield would close ranks to prevent enemy penetration. It seems that the believers in Colossae were good at holding one another up.

Paul also commended their ‘steadfastness’ (*stereōma*). This military term referred to the solidity of a formation of soldiers. Their ‘faith in Christ’ was not flimsy. It had a dogged quality to it. Paul is like a general, inspecting his troops and rejoicing to see that they are displaying the disciplined formation (*taxis*) and strong force (*stereōma*) that they will need to fight the false teachers.

Taken together, these two terms express Paul’s joy that individually and collectively the Colossians were standing firm against the attacks of false teaching. This augured well for the future. The church in Colossae faced a genuine threat, but it had already learned the knack of closing ranks in a stout, enduring fashion. And although he was not physically present, Paul stood in the ranks alongside his fellow soldiers.

Paul’s commendation to the Colossians is in keeping with his other direct reference to their spiritual state (1:4-6). And the language he uses later in this chapter suggests that the false teaching is something to be resisted, not something that has already infected the church. The Colossian Christians have started well (1:7-8) and they are continuing well. It is the future for which Paul is concerned. The epistle is a vaccination against heresy, not an antibiotic for those already afflicted.

5. Conclusion

One thing that emerges clearly as we read these verses is Paul’s readiness to identify himself closely with the interests of a group of Christians that he had not met in person. He was elated at their encouragements and deeply concerned by the challenges that confronted them. Faced with Paul’s example, we would do well to ask ourselves whether we are on the way to becoming Christians who have a thoughtful, well-informed concern for our brothers and in a variety of situations throughout the world.

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B. Paul's Command for the Church (Col. 2:6-7)

If, as Paul did, we resist the claims of those who suggest that moving on in the Christian life means moving beyond mere faith in Christ, we must be equally clear that there is a place for Christian progress. Paul did not want the believers in Colossae to stagnate. The New Testament insists that believers must seek to advance in their Christian development (cp. 1 Pe. 2:2). Given that Christian progress is an urgent necessity for every true believer, what form does growth in grace actually take? Having come to faith in Christ, do we grow in Christ, or does spiritual growth somehow take us beyond Christ? This is the subject that Paul addresses in verses 6-7. He reminds them of their conversion to Christ and encourages them to continue in the faith rather than be led astray by false doctrine.

The imperative at the end of verse 6 is the first in the letter, and the first of a series of commands that dominate the flow of 2:6-4:6. Colossians 2:6-7, with its central command to 'continue to live your lives in Him,' states the overarching point of the whole letter body. This paragraph, along with the closely related 2:8-15, is the heart of Colossians. In these two verses Paul succinctly summarizes the basic response that he wants from his readers. Paul ties these verses to their context by reflecting language and ideas found earlier in the letter. The positive exhortation to 'continue to live in Christ,' which is elaborated in a series of four participles (vv. 6-7), is very similar to what Paul has prayed for in 1:10-12.

1. Received (2:6a)

'As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord ...'

'Therefore' builds the concluding exhortation on what Paul has said in verses 2-5.

The first clause succinctly restates the key theological argument of the letter to this point: Jesus Christ is Lord, and we have entered into His Lordship.

Conversion is described as their having 'received Christ.' It is not something they achieved through their own efforts. In saying that they had 'received' Christ, the apostle meant that a number of things were true of his readers in Colossae. In the first place, they had made a wholehearted endorsement of the central facts of Christ's life and ministry (cp. 1 Cor. 15:4). Faith as Paul understood it, however, involves more than a hearty agreement that what the Bible says about Jesus really happened. Faith involves entrusting all that I am to the Jesus who is revealed in the Bible. Faith unites me to Christ. It makes me one with Him.

The verb 'receive' (*paralambanō*) is usually used by Paul to refer to the 'receiving' or 'accepting' of tradition about Christ and His significance. In keeping with the Christological focus of this letter, however, Paul refers here not to the receiving of teaching, or tradition, or the word of God, but of Christ Himself. To 'receive Christ' is not only a matter of believing 'in' His person; it also involves a commitment to the apostolic teaching about Christ and His significance. This tradition, which the Colossians have heard from the faithful Epaphras (1:7-8) stands in contrast to the 'human tradition' of the false teachers (v. 8).

This point is underscored in the way Paul describes Christ: *ton Christon Iēsoun ton kyrion* (literally, 'the Christ Jesus the Lord'). Paul exhibits considerable variety in the way that he uses those three names, or titles. But never elsewhere does he use exactly the same sequence of names and articles that we find here: indeed, this combination is found nowhere else in the New Testament (cp. 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:11). 'Jesus Christ is Lord' is a succinct way of saying that He

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is ‘the image of the invisible God’, ‘the firstborn over all creation’ (1:15), the head of the body, the church’ (1:18), ‘the mystery of God’ (2:2; cp. 1:27), and the repository of ‘all wisdom and knowledge’ (2:3). It is this central confession, with all its varied and far-reaching implications, to which the Colossians need to return in order to ward off the threat of the false teaching.

Receiving Him means more than simply accepting Him. The Colossians received the teaching and tradition handed down about Christ. They received Him as the ‘Christ,’ the Anointed One or Messiah. They received Him as the One who fulfilled all the Messianic prophesies of the Old Testament. He was their Divine Prophet, Priest, and King. They also received Him as ‘Jesus,’ a historical person rooted in humanity through the Incarnation. And they received Him as ‘Lord.’ ‘Lord’ gathers up all that Paul had previously said about Christ in Colossians. It is a dynamic, comprehensive title.

It is noticeable that the Christ whom we receive is ‘the Lord.’ All Christians receive ‘the Lord.’ Nothing else is possible. That is who Jesus is. Even so, there are teachers who say that the Christian life takes place in two stages: at the outset we receive Christ as Savior; further down the road, some, but not all believers, receive Him as Lord. Teaching of this kind is a terrible distortion of the gospel.

We too will be resistant to the Gnosticizing influences around us if we walk in the reality of ‘Christ Jesus as Lord.’ The reason the major cults are cults (e.g., Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christian Science, etc.) is because they have defective doctrines of Christ.

2. Walk (2:6b)

‘So walk in Him.’

This second clause summarizes the specific command and warnings that follow: we are to ‘continue to live in him,’ to work out just what it means in both our thinking and our acting to live under the Lordship of Christ. Paul has earlier prayed that the Colossians might learn to ‘live a life pleasing to the Lord’ (1:10). Paul makes the same connection here. ‘Continue to live your lives,’ as in 1:10, translates the Greek verb *peripateō* (‘walk’). Paul is telling them, in effect, to ‘remain where you are!’

Our experience of first coming to Christ ought to mirror how we walk in Him all the days of our lives. If we have received Christ, there is an ethical imperative. We must make a disciplined and systematic attempt to bring the whole of life into line with His commandments (cp. 2 Pe. 1:5-8). The familiar term ‘walk’ refers to daily conduct. In this context it means primarily to continue believing the truth about Christ, not allowing their Christology to waver. Progress is not an option for the favored few, but the will of Christ for all His people. We are not merely to receive the ‘pure gospel message’ and then stagnate. We are meant to make progress in the Christian life.

There is a similarity between Paul’s prayer in 1:10-12 and his exhortation in 2:6-7. In both texts, Paul uses four participles to elaborate the nature of the ‘life’ or ‘walk’ that should characterize believers. Both series of participles employ a horticultural metaphor; and both conclude with a reference to thanksgiving. The parallelism is a striking example of the way Paul will use his opening prayer to anticipate some themes of the letter to follow. The participles of verse 7 tell us how we can continue to live a life that gives Christ His rightful place as Lord.

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3. Rooted and Built Up (2:7a)

‘Rooted and built up in Him ...’

When Paul used the word ‘rooted,’ he probably had the imagery of Psalm 1 in mind, picturing them as trees that send their roots wide and deep into the soil of Christ, thus drawing from His very life. That eternal planting took place at salvation, as the perfect tense of the participle *errizōmenoi* (‘having been firmly rooted’) suggests. Just as a plant needs to take in sustenance from the ground, so the Christian must continually draw spiritual nourishment from Christ.

The word ‘built’ (*epoikodomoumenoi*) is present tense participle indicating continuous action. Paul here uses an illustration from the world of construction. For a house to rise, it needs, first of all, to have a firm foundation. Having made a good beginning, the Christian must not give way to complacency and stop there. All Christians have one glorious fact in common. Each and every one of them has a solid foundation that will stand the most searching test of all. Build on Christ, and you will outlast the world itself.

Progress, however, though it is a moral and spiritual imperative, is always ‘in Christ.’ Those who are rooted in Christ are not built up by moving away from Christ to something else. Together, these participles emphasize that believers can live lives that exemplify the Lordship of Christ only by remaining, like branches, firmly attached to the vine in which God has Himself planted them (cp. John 15) and by continuing to allow God to integrate them, like stones, into the new structure that is nothing other than Christ Himself (cp. 1 Pe. 2:5-8). As believers, our foundation rests on Christ and in Christ, and we are to be about the business of enhancing this relationship. We are to dig deep into the soil of Christ, there plant our lives, and spend our remaining days becoming a building worthy of the foundation.

4. Established (2:7b)

‘And established in the faith, as you have been taught ...’

The third participle may shift metaphors yet again for *bebaioō* occurs in legal texts to mean ‘validate’ or ‘guarantee.’ It is used generally in the LXX and New Testament, where it means ‘confirm’ (cp. Rom. 15:8; 1 Cor. 1:6; Heb. 2:3), but, especially with a personal object (as here in Colossians), ‘strengthen’ or ‘establish’ (Ps. 40:13; 118:28; 1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:21; Heb. 13:9). With this participle, Paul summarizes what he expects to happen as a result of the first two: by sticking to their roots and being built up, the readers will be established in the faith. Like the first two participles, this one also is in the passive voice, *bebaioumenoi* (‘established’), indicating that it is God who will establish believers.

‘The faith’ (*pistei*) Paul speaks of is their adherence to the doctrines (teachings) of the gospel. This is usually referred to as ‘the faith’ as opposed to ‘our faith in Christ.’ With the phrase ‘as you were taught’ Paul returns to where this sentence began, with the ‘tradition’ that the Christians have received in contradistinction to the new teaching in Colossae. The false teachers had obviously spoken to the Colossians about the need to grow up in their faith. By this they meant that they should ‘go beyond’ what the apostles had taught them through people like Epaphras. However, Paul counters this by telling them that they should be ‘strengthened in the faith.’ Paul wants again to remind the Colossians that Epaphras has faithfully conveyed to them the true message of Christ, an emphasis that we have seen at several points in chapter 1 (vv. 5-8; v. 23).

Philemon/Colossians – Lesson 7

Growing up in spiritual things does not mean moving past the Christ who saved us and leaving Him behind, but growing up in Christ (cp. 1 Cor. 14:20). Growth does not discard the early truths of Jesus Christ for newer truth, as the Gnostics were teaching. Jesus is not a beginning, to be left behind by the ‘mature.’

This is a sharp challenge to much of modern evangelicalism, which thrives on a cult of the infantile and the asinine. A thirst to know more about Jesus is rare enough to be refreshing. It is wonderfully heartening when we encounter someone who has an insatiable appetite for sermons and good Christian literature. Paul’s concern, is not that we should become established in truth for its own sake, but established in truth about Christ so that we might trust and appreciate Him all the more. A person who is obsessed with Jesus cannot help but begin to resemble Him.

5. Thankful (2:7c)

‘Abounding in it with thanksgiving.’

The last of the four participles in verse 7, *perisseuontes* (‘overflowing’), is the only one in the active voice. It is a response to the other three. Believers who are firmly rooted in Christ, being built up in Him, and established in their faith, will overflow with gratitude to God. A grateful heart for all God has given us in Christ will further strengthen our grip on the truth.

A thankful heart understands grace. The man who gets what he deserves has no one to thank but himself, but the man who is given far more than he could ever deserve, and who has been treated with lavish but completely unmerited kindness, should surely be grateful. Thankfulness points away from ourselves and from what we have done, and enjoys with amazement all that Christ has done (cp. 2 Cor. 8:9). A healthy Christian walk spills over with gratitude and praise.

They should not be filled with thankfulness because they were more spiritually mature than others, and not only because they had entered into the fullness of spiritual ‘wisdom and knowledge’ (2:3), but because they were upholding the doctrines of Christ, and all the glory was going to Him.

6. Conclusion

Paul was ambitious for the believers in first-century Colossae. He wanted them to yearn for spiritual excellence with a deep longing. He pressed this upon them, arguing that a good beginning by itself is not enough. A good start to the Christian life calls for ongoing progress. For those who have received Christ, continuing to walk in Him is not merely desirable: it is essential. What use is a foundation without a superstructure? In the same way, while the Christian life begins when we first entrust ourselves to Jesus Christ, faith does not stop at that point. We begin by faith in God’s Son and we continue as that faith grows and develops.

Praise completes the circle in which the blessings that flow to us from God return to Him in the form of our praise and adoration. By taking in the truth of the Word, believers get a strong mind. By living out those truths, they receive full assurance that Christ is who He claimed to be. Assured of that, they can appropriate the riches that are His legacy to believers, and walk in Him. As they walk in Him, they will grow in Him and become established in their faith. As a result, they will give praise to God.

For next time: Read Colossians 2:8-15.