

Colossians 2:1-5 “The Complete Christian Loves, Thinks, and Acts in the Light of His Union with Christ” July 14, 2019

Thus far in this letter Paul has cast some very deep and vital anchor lines of the gospel for us. One of these is the mystery of God’s grace towards sinners. How can God be both merciful and just? How can God bring sinners into His glory and still remain true to His word?

Through the Christ. **That is, Christ in them, the hope of glory.** This phrase, “Christ in you”, and those like it, “you are in Christ”, is not an esoteric or mystical concept of some kind of sameness. You are not the Christ. The Christ is not you. Rather, these are phrases which describe a status, a legal standing, a union, mystical in its spiritual reality set in the heavens by God, but not some kind of existential unity of personhood. This union is like a marriage union, where two become one. This does not mean that the husband is the wife, nor the wife the husband, and neither the male nor the female are interchangeable. Rather, it is a unity of position and status before God whereby the husband and wife answer to God as one legal union before the Law. They share in each other’s successes and sufferings, in each other assets and liabilities, in each other’s honor and shame. In fact, that image is the very image which the apostle, by the Holy Spirit, makes in his letter to the Ephesians, when he says that the union of husband and wife into one flesh is not the real mystery, though it is mystical, but rather the reflection, or the icon, of the true mystery, which is the union between Christ Jesus and His Church.

Thus, this union with Christ Jesus, the substance which every God-honoring union between man and woman reflects, is, at its root a status and legal union (without neglecting the intimacy and spiritual joy which it also includes) whereby the assets of Christ are imputed to the Church and the liabilities of the Church are imputed to Christ Jesus to answer for. The great joy of the gospel is that those who believe in Jesus Christ, who are united to Him by repentant faith, share in His glory. Thus, Christ in you, the hope of glory. The inheritance which He receives from the Father, He shares with His Church, with you, because of the great love with which the Father has loved you and which the Son presents you and which the Spirit delivers to you.

This sharing of His great glory also includes our sharing in His sufferings, as Paul also alludes to in the previous section. But, it is this union which undergirds the very thoughts of the apostle as he wrestles over how to protect and provide for the Church who need to discern the true nature of the Christ to whom they are united, for there are others out there who are promising a “true knowledge of God” and a “secret intimacy with God” and a “greater wisdom from God”, but they are detached from and deviant from the Christ.

The point is that Jesus is all that you need in order to know God fully, as friends, and to receive all of God’s honor and blessings completely and without lack. Therefore, says the apostle, we proclaim Him in order to present every person complete in Him, which is to say walking consistently in one’s union to Him, via repentance and faith. That is, the completeness which every human needs, the wholeness, the integrated soul, the satisfaction of our longings, is found in Christ alone and only Christ. There is nothing to be found outside of Him which our soul needs in order to truly know God and experience the fullness of life. There is only Christ. Anything which claims to add an experience of God to the person and work of Jesus is “another gospel”, which the apostle, in his letter to the Galatian churches, derides as something to be cut off and thrown away. This is the discernment which the apostle seeks.

And how do they proclaim Him? Teaching and admonishing. Ordering our minds around the centrality of Christ Jesus as Him in whom are kept all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge of God. To teach is to announce what is true, what is real, what is ultimate and will not pass away. It is to correct our false beliefs by laying out the Real which God has revealed. There is an assumption here worth noting: God knows how things are, and God knows how things are supposed to be. Therefore, it is God, and God alone, who is worth listening to in regards to how humans are built to function and why they were built at all, etc. It is not our feelings about what should be that are true. It is not our political leaders’ opinions about what should be that are true. It is not our religious leaders’ passion about what should be that is true. It is God, and God reveals His purpose, His design, His glory and our hope, in His Word. Therefore, the teaching which works to present all of us as complete is God’s Word in the

Scriptures, as they show us what God has done to bring us to be “in Christ” by faith. To present all of us complete in Him is the goal of all teaching.

To admonish simply means to bring one’s thinking into a place of firm standing. It has the idea of ordering our thoughts, our valuations, our loves, our delights, our fears, our presuppositions, etc. upon the Real, the True, the way that God has designed us to be. It seeks to reorder thoughts, fears, loves, desires, and values, which are based upon believing untrue things and loving unworthy things, so that that we believe the true things and love the worthy things in proper order.

Therefore, to teach and admonish is not merely to tell the truth, to study the doctrines of the faith, to know the facts of God’s revealed truth, but to admonish one another to walk in the light of them, to work out our *functional* faith consistently with it. That is what it means to be “complete in Him.” Complete has the idea of a full circle, completed, reached its intended end. Thus, the teaching of the facts are vital in order to know God, but they are not the end goal. We must *believe* them to act upon them, as faith without works is dead. The one “complete in Christ” is the one who is walking consistently with the truth of His union with Christ Jesus.

This is the work of the Christian life. This is the work of Christian ministry. This is what Paul wants you to know, and to know how great his struggle is for you to that end.

Sometimes the chapter and numbering system in our modern Bibles is unfortunate. We must remember that Paul wrote one letter, not four chapters, and chapter 2 actually begins in the middle of the flow of thought which began in 1:24. He wants you to know this Christ whom he proclaims: Jesus the sufficient and supreme fullness of God. There is no more truth to be known than the Christ. There is no knowledge to be gained than to know Him. There is no experience to be had than to experience the union of the Son of God to His Bride by faith alone, from the grace and generosity of God alone, for the glory of God alone, who oddly shares it with His redeemed, which is our only hope of knowing glory.

As Paul has delivered a description of the apostolic ministry, “we proclaim Him, teaching and admonishing every person in order to present them complete in Christ”, he now proceeds to give us some insight into his, and his fellow workers’, internal struggles of love and service as they seek to fulfill their ministry to present every person complete in Christ. He is intentionally intimate in his language, for these believers know him only by name and reputation, not by firsthand knowledge. They had never seen him face to face. They had not spent time with the apostle, to know his body language, to hear the passion of his voice when he spoke of the Christ, to hear his compassion catch in his throat when he spoke to their sufferings, to see the fire in his eyes when he saw the danger of false teaching and the obstinacy of the slick and persuasive false prophets who frequently led many astray wherever the Church was established. They wouldn’t have known these things by sight and sound, by touch and smell. In this manner, they are just like you and me.

Therefore, the intimacy of the apostle’s language here, the struggle of which he speaks and the longing which he exemplifies in his efforts are his efforts to see Christians, to see you who have believed in Jesus, complete in Jesus.

For, Paul does not merely state *that* he struggles and fights to see this accomplished, but he says that he wants us to know “*how great*” is that struggle. How hard that he is fighting for them, though they have never seen them. And this labor, this Christian ministry which is the goal of every honorable and obedient follower of Christ, is a great conflict. It is a fight, a battle of love for Christ and for those who belong to Christ. Note that this conflict, in the heart of the apostle, is not for the unconverted, primarily, but for the converted. The passionate conflict in him now, and the power at work in him and through him (1:29), is mainly for teaching and admonishing the whole gospel to those who have entrusted themselves to Jesus. In fact, it is THE fight, which Paul told the Ephesians, a letter which he wrote at the same time as this one, which is not against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of darkness which seek to see people not united to Christ and not centering their lives upon Him and not entrusting Him as the sufficient wisdom of God.

You see, every work of the enemy of God is attempting to get you to make less of Christ, and while one strategy which may be is to seek to get us to doubt the veracity of the gospel by rejecting the need for Jesus (to reject God's wrath), the strategy of the enemy which Paul addresses in this letter is to doubt the sufficiency of Jesus, to accept our need for him, but to see His work as only partial and our need to obtain, through our own works and experiences, the fullness of God's intentions. And it is a great struggle, because the heart of man wants so desperately to rule his own heart, to be his own authority, to depend upon his own strength, to add something of our own production to our salvation of which we can boast.

It is the same error that befell our original parents in the garden, the temptation to taste the fruit, to be as wise as God, to add to His original design by our taking. Of course, it wasn't merely the recognition of the beauty of the fruit which was the problem, but the tasting of it, the reordering of their lives around it in an attempt to obtain the wisdom of God, "You will be as wise as God" said the serpent, via means superseding what God said was sufficient. And, like our same attempts today to gain God's wisdom outside of Christ, or in addition to Him, it does not actually make us wise, but enslaves and destroys us.

Therefore, the apostle works greatly, struggles greatly, and he wants you to know how greatly he struggles, employing both athletic metaphors (struggles/wrestles) and military metaphors "good order" and "firmness."

And to what end is his labor? **What does this "completeness" or "maturity" look like?** Well, he describes it in four different ways in vv1-5 here, and they are all connected. He says, firstly, "so that", which indicates the purpose of his great wrestling, "that your hearts may be strengthened..." That is the goal, to have strong hearts. We need to be strengthened, encouraged, bolstered. In fact, this is the word παρακαλεω, another military metaphor which means to draw up alongside a struggling and weakened fellow soldier in order to encourage him to continue and not give up. It is the title given to the Holy Spirit by Jesus in John 14.

It is to be made courageous, resilient, hopeful. You see, "the hope of glory" which is our union with Christ, is not glory itself, but the hope of it. He does not say, "Christ in

you, the glory”, but rather, “Christ in you, the hope...” It is hope, which lies in the future, not the present, which strengthens us now. And this hope, this glory, is not the gifts of heaven, but the Giver. It is a person: the mystery of God, which is Christ Himself. We need to be strengthened in our hearts in order to hope and not give up, and this hope is Christ has bound Himself to you, a bond of intimate brotherhood, not of equals, for it is of grace and He is supreme, but neither is such a hope merely derivative of glory, but glorious in itself, the fullness of all which mankind is intended to be, bound to Christ Jesus as our firm assurance of glory.

This hope, because of the quality of this Christ to whom we are united (15-23), is what encourages our hearts and strengthens our souls through the second and third ways that Paul describes this completion, or maturity, in Christ. He continues in verse 2, to explain that our hearts are strengthened, “being knit together in love and into all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ.”

The unity of love and the unity of understanding are correlative means by which our hearts are strengthened. We are not only one in heart, but also one in mind as well. Here again we see the necessity of both love and truth in conjunction with God’s design. Every Christian who walks faithfully will stand with Paul on this issue, that is, he will endure a great conflict and great suffering before God rather than surrender the cause of that definite, clear assured understanding of the Christ among his people. Love never compromises the truth. It is compassionate to the one in error, but gives no allowance to the error.

Love is itself dependent in its activity upon truth and justice. For nobody loves another who delights in his error or his ruin. The one who loves fights for the freedom of the truth seen, loved, and lived by the one whom he loves, for walking in the light is to live fully and freely. In this manner, we are knit together in love as we are knit together in the truth, and by such means our hearts are strengthened in the light of our hope of glory, which is our union with the Son of God.

Regarding this dual necessity of truth and love, I think that the apostle is speaking of that quality of faith which acts accordingly to what it professes to believe. It is the

opposite of hypocrisy, it is integrity. As the grace of God is more fully grasped as the sufficient wellspring of God's goodness towards us in Christ, as we more fully grasp that our sins are truly forgiven in Christ, we forgive others. As we grasp that our righteousness is filthy rags and that we have the righteousness of Christ imputed to us as a sheer gift of God, we are patient towards the unrighteousness of others, we cease boasting of our own successes, we edify one another and encourage one another. In a community where love and forgiveness, justice and righteousness, are lived out in our relationships, there is a visible representation of the gospel which encourages our souls. And the conviction in our souls which acts thusly, carrying crosses in order to forgive one another, speaking the truth even when it upsets the pride of another, is settled as the community grows in its proper understanding of the gospel. Thus there is a reciprocating work of understanding the riches of our assurance in the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ for us and the working out of that salvation in the love and edification of one another because of this knowledge which actually feeds our understanding of the gospel, the strengthening of hearts in love, the rich blessings of knowing Christ Jesus.

And that is where we find the resources for such a struggle, for its necessary strengthening of heart, for unity in love and knowledge, for one-mindedness and one-heartedness. We find the resources in the knowledge of Christ Jesus Himself. He is our "full assurance" because "in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (v3)

Consider this phrase for a moment. If you want to know God, where do you look? If you want to know what it means to be "complete", where do you look? If you want to love well...where do you look? You search the treasury of God's wisdom and understanding...and that is Christ Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah. You go back to 1:15-23 and read it again. You see, Paul uses a word here which I find mesmerizing. He says that all the wisdom and knowledge of God's truth are "hidden treasures" in the treasury box of Christ Jesus.

We learn two things which encourage our hearts and comfort us here. First, all the wisdom that we need and all the knowledge that is to be found, is ours in Christ. There

is nothing more which we need and nothing more which must be discovered outside of Him. We do not need to look for wisdom or knowledge elsewhere than the one whom we already possess, who is united to us in His kindness. But, secondly, we have a long way to go yet. These things are hidden in Him and must be explored. He is not merely a treasure box to be unlocked, but a person to be known. You see, the treasures of God's wisdom and knowledge are not mere facts, nor powers to be obtained, nor blessings to be achieved or unlocked or activated. Jesus Himself is the mystery of God. He is the wisdom of God and the knowledge of God. He is the treasure and the box. He is Wisdom personified, not just a clue or a key to it, as though it were something other than Himself. Everything we might want to ask about God and His purposes can and must now be answered in reference to this Jesus, and Paul's metaphor of hidden treasure invites us to explore Him eagerly, as treasure seekers who delight in the glorious beauty and worth of discovering Him progressively more each day.

Think about this. Why do you despair? Or, better yet, why do you despair if you are united to Jesus? I think it is because we do not yet know, or we have forgotten, who this Jesus is to whom we are united. Our struggle is to know Him rightly and properly and accurately. It is to know Him *as he truly is*, and not how we may think Him to be or how we are told about who he is from others. You see, one of the most precious aspects of our union with Christ Jesus is that our salvation, our hope of glory, is not contingent upon our strength, but upon His. Like a child held by his mother may fall asleep and lose his grip upon her does not mean that she drops him. It is her arms which hold him up. It is the arms of Christ, those pierced for our transgressions, which hold us secure and give us the firm assurance of God's grace towards us. This fills us with encouragement, strengthens us to pick up our packs and carry on to labor with the energy which He so powerfully works within us, to suffer with Him because we will be glorified with Him, to walk in the light of our union with Him through a world darkened by its curse, remembering that the Dawn is rising and the Son is coming back again to shine upon you. We walk in the light of this hope, rooted and established in the supremacy and sufficiency of the Christ alone. It is to this end and this purpose which the apostle writes these things. **He says, "I say this to you so that nobody may delude you with persuasive arguments..."** Here is the fourth way which a Christian

walks in completeness: discernment of the errors which depart from the sufficiency of Christ Jesus.

Because there are those who would seek to make us believe that Jesus is someone whom he is not; to believe that we need something more than Him, something in addition to Him, some power or method or passion; to seek some other treasure or to look outside of Him for some other box of supposed treasures of God or of wisdom. This leads to nothing but futility and hopelessness, not simply because they are wrong, but because such search is impotent and impossible to succeed in. It is to set one's hope vainly and emptily upon the words of a con man, sent into the desert to find water where there is none, only to wither in despair. You see, we despair because we believe the con man, we believe the charlatan, we listen to the hawker and the snake oil salesmen pitching their versions of so-called truth and knowledge and mystery which are nothing but a delusion.

What is a delusion? It is to believe something which is not true and not real as if it were true and were real. But, reality is always there, even when the delusion captivates us. Delusion is the basis of the Matrix movie, where humanity believes a world exists which actually doesn't, and some are content to live in a delusion because it feels better, but some are not because it is untrue.

Yes, there are those who are persuasive, who can captivate us with words which promise goodness and greatness, but who actually delude us into walking in a way which harms us and steals our joy. Clearly Paul recognizes this danger, for his fourth way of encouraging us is to warn us about such dangers and to rejoice at what he sees that is good, that standing in good order, which is entrusting ourselves to Christ and nothing else, is praiseworthy.

It is good to note that persuasion itself is not a bad thing. In fact, Paul himself seeks to persuade men of the truth, but he does so by facing into the fact, not hiding them or ignoring them. It is not a delusion which he contends for, but reality. One could say, in fact, that contending for reality by weighing the facts and evidences and reasoning accordingly is the means by which one is persuaded out of delusion and into reality.

Yet, there are those who are not seeking the truth and do not want to hold true to the reality which God has presented in His Word. They will twist the Scriptures, alter the doctrines of the faith by doing so, proclaim a different gospel, which really isn't good news at all, ignore the reality of sin or of grace, reject the sufficiency of Christ and seek to get you believe that you can achieve greatness, or wholeness, or completeness, by means of something other than the completed work of the crucified, risen, and reigning Jesus.

Reject them. Reject their work. Reject their claims, even when they come in the name of Jesus or in the guise of the Church. Reject them because they are delusions, because they have no power and no capability to bring you hope. They are clouds without water, noxious puffs of poison which corrupt our thoughts while leading us to believe that we are truly living, like heroin or opiates, making us feel like we're living fully, but slowly degrading our souls into destruction.

One of the ways the modern heretics do this is related to something which Paul tells us regarding Christ as our "hope of glory." Some today wish you to believe that you must bring heaven to earth, that glory is not a hope for tomorrow, but should be an experience for today. Thus, they seek, twisting the Word of God and denying the Master who bought them, they look for means outside of the person and finished work of Christ to abscond glory, and it is delusional. Such hypercharisma believes the illusion that rolling around on the floor, laughing hysterically, jerking around violently, losing the control of thought and reason, is spiritual wisdom and the true knowledge of God.

Yet, Paul does not praise the Colossians for their experiences like this, but rather for just the opposite, for their "good order" and the "firmness" of their faith in Christ. Not for chaos, but for control. Not for spiritual-*ism*, but for their standing firm upon the Christ. Their standing firm in the faith is evidenced by their thoughtful, unified, organized, self-controlled resistance to anything other than Christ Jesus' death, resurrection, and return as the means to glory, which remains a hope until He returns. Therefore, we are to set our minds on the things in the heavens (chapter 3), where Christ is, and not seek to pull Him down out of heaven, but to live in the light of our

future hope, by faith and not by sight. Anything which departs from this is a delusion taught by persuasive con men.

Jesus is sufficient. He is the wisdom of God and the knowledge of God. He is the Word expressly revealing God outside of whom there is no knowledge of God. Therefore, what are we to do? We are to walk in the same way as we first received Jesus as the Lord. By faith. Entrusting our whole selves to Him as the Husband to whom we are a bride, as the Head to whom we are members, as the Vine to whom we are branches.

In our union to Him we find hope of glory because He is superlatively unique in His capability and sufficiency for all the wisdom and knowledge for which we were made to know and do. Who you believe Him to be determines your courage, your hope, your unity in love and truth, and your ability to discern the truth from error and to stand firm in Reality. Therefore, seek to know Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word. Strive and labor and toil to understand Him and the sufficiency and supremacy of His work. In so doing you will love well as you walk in the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the wisdom and knowledge of God.