

Series: The Letter to the Colossians
Title: "Jesus' Desire For His People"
Text: Colossians 2:1-3
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Verse 1

Paul continued his discussion concerning his ministry by saying, "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face" (Colossians 2:1). Though our modern chapter and verse divisions make a distinction between the end of chapter one and the beginning of chapter two, Paul's words in 2:1 are really a continuation of what he had said in 1:25-29. His focus was still on the nature of his ministry as an apostle. What was different between 1:25-29 and 2:1-5 was Paul's focus on the aim of his ministry. In 2:1-5, Paul spoke more specifically of the purpose and goal of his ministry. Paul wanted his readers to know why he struggled so intentionally on their behalf.

The Greek word for "struggle" in 2:1 was the noun form of the verb Paul used back in 1:29 when he spoke of the way he struggled with the energy of Christ in Christian ministry. It was the Greek word from which we get "agony." Some have translated the word as "anxiety."¹ It was used in the ancient games of the Graeco-Roman world. One has commented on the meaning of the word, saying, "The picture is that of an athletic contest which is strenuous and demanding."² Paul implemented the term to depict the way he exerted great physical, emotional, and spiritual energy for the sake of Christ's kingdom.

It is important to note the reason or source of Paul's struggle. As he preached and shared the gospel, he continually faced contradiction from the world, the flesh, and the devil. He particularly faced resistance from gospel detractors. Such was the nature of his struggle, and such is the nature of the struggle all will encounter when they seek to exalt Christ in a fallen world. Commenting on the nature of Paul's struggle, one has said, "The struggle here is not the struggle against God, but the intense effort of the one praying as he struggles within himself and against those who oppose the gospel."³

It is worth considering why Paul mentioned his struggles when writing to the Colossians. Perhaps it was his way of making an innuendo concerning the false teachers at Colossae. Maybe he intended to point to the trustworthiness of his ministry by describing the way he was willing to suffer. The false teachers in Colossae had doctrines that seemed "plausible" (2:4), but were they willing to endure hardship for what they taught? One has noted, that "...there is every reason to infer that the false teachers in Colossae were offering a pain-free variety of Christianity that was not

¹ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 172.

² Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 463.

³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

Christianity at all.”⁴ It seems that Paul held up his sufferings as evidence for the trustworthiness of his preaching. He did something similar when writing to the church at Corinth (2 Corinthians 11:21-29).

There is another way of looking at Paul’s repeated references to his suffering. Maybe he was encouraging his readers to embrace hardship. We have already noted that the region surrounding Colossae was once a wealthy region; however, it experienced an economic downturn at some point before the time of Paul’s writing. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul made repeated references to his suffering, but he also made repeated references to how true riches are found in Christ (Colossians 1:27; 2:3). Maybe there were elements in the Colossian heresy that were akin to teachings found in the modern prosperity gospel. Perhaps false religionists promised economic renewal to those who would follow their teachings. Paul could have said what he said about his suffering in order to encourage his readers to embrace hard providences faithfully.

In talking about his suffering, Paul made mention of another church — “those at Laodicea.” His words were a reference to the same city and congregation mentioned in the book of Revelation (Revelation 3:14-22). In that book, Jesus rebuked the church at Laodicea for its spiritual lukewarmness (Revelation 3:15-17). Laodicea was a neighboring city to Colossae. Together, the three cities of Laodicea, Colossae, and Hierapolis formed a triangle on the map. Paul mentioned the third city, Hierapolis, at the end of his letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:13). He also mentioned how he had sent a separate letter to the church at Laodicea (Colossians 4:16).

All three cities — Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis — existed in what is now modern-day Turkey. The region in which they were located was known as “the Lycus Valley.” Together, the three cities experienced great economic prosperity at different times. This was due to the rich mineral deposits and farmland in the region. As mentioned earlier, the cities had experienced an economic downturn at some point prior to Paul’s writing. The glory of the Lycus Valley had faded to a degree.

When Paul’s letter was sent to the church at Colossae, it was likely read in a Lord’s Day meeting. Afterwards, copies of the letter were probably made. Next, the church kept a copy of the letter for its own use, and it likely sent duplicate copies to sister churches in its surrounding region. It seems, Paul mentioned the church at Laodicea in Colossians 2:1 because he likely hoped that the Colossians would send a copy of his letter to the neighboring church. See Colossians 4:16 for Paul’s direct instruction concerning this matter. It seems the Gnostic heresy was impacting all churches in the region. The apostle wanted all of them to hear what he had to say about such things.

Paul also wanted to express his love for the church. He wanted his readers to know that he had struggled spiritually for all the congregations within the Lycus Valley. Though he had not personally visited the region (“all who have not seen me face to face”), he had heard of how churches had been planted there after he had preached in the surrounding areas (Acts 19:10; Colossians 1:7). Having heard of the faith in the

⁴ Johnston, Mark G. *Let’s Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 49.

Lycus Valley, and also having heard of false teaching in the region, Paul continually struggled in prayers for the churches.

In speaking of his burden for the congregations in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, Paul made mention of the fact that they had not “seen” him “face to face.” The apostle’s words spoke of more than just mere “seeing.” They included the act of “perceiving.”⁵ In regards to interpersonal relationships, his language had connotations of close fellowship and personal acquaintance.⁶ Paul liked to have such one-on-one bonding with other churches (see Acts 20:17), but he had never had the opportunity to spend time with the believers in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor. As one has said, the churches there had “a knowledge of Him, though not a personal one.”⁷ Paul’s words concerning such one-on-one fellowship gave witness to his genuine love for the church. When compared to the prosperity-oriented focus of the false religionists, Paul’s loving devotion was evidence that his ministry was genuine and valid. The heretics of the Lycus Valley didn’t have the same genuine concern for the church that he did. If his readers were wise and observant, they would have noticed such things and distanced themselves from the heretics.

Verse 2

Paul continued his discussion of his ministry by describing his heart desire for the churches of the Lycus Valley. He said, “...that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ” (Colossians 2:2). The word “that” at the beginning of verse 2 was a word that denoted purpose. It pointed to the reason for the struggle Paul spoke of in verse 1.⁸

The word “encouraged” was a compound word in the original language of the New Testament. It had a basic meaning of one calling upon another for help. The word could be translated as meaning “to aid,” “to help,” or “to comfort.” When we read the New Testament, we learn that such helping, comforting, and encouraging is a primary purpose of the church’s regular meetings. In Hebrews, we read: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:24-25). Paul told Timothy to use the regular worship times of the church as an opportunity to encourage believers: “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). When writing to the church at Thessalonica, Paul said, “Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

⁵ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), 1054.

⁶ Zodhiates, 1055.

⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

Believers throughout the Lycus Valley were undoubtedly a bit discouraged because of the divisions occurring over false doctrine. Paul wanted the faithful to cheer up. He knew that strengthening was possible because of the Lord's promises. Interestingly, he employed a passive tense verb when speaking of encouragement. It portrayed the Lord acting upon the believers at Colossae; thus, it depicted Christian encouragement as the product of a supernatural work upon the human soul. Believers must learn, like King David of the Old Testament, to find encouragement in the person and promises of the Lord (1 Samuel 30:6). Only the Lord can provide the encouragement we need.

Christian encouragement is not based on hollow, man-produced, false pretenses of cheer. It is grounded in the realities of Christ. Using the same Greek word translated "encouraged" in Colossians 2:2, Jesus guaranteed that he would comfort all who depend upon Him. He said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." (Matthew 5:4). Those who mourn over sin and trust in Jesus will receive supernatural, otherworldly encouragement. In 2 Corinthians 1:4, Paul described the way true believers experience such encouragement through Christ: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Christian encouragement is not a surface level thing; it is a soul-level thing. Christ's encouragement takes place through an internal work within the human heart. Such is seen in Colossians 2:2 by the way Paul spoke of it taking place in the "hearts" of his readers. In the first-century world, the heart was the center of the person — the seat from which affections, passions, thoughts and desires did emanate. We can think of the word "hearts" as being synonymous with the human mind, soul, or spirit. One has described what Paul meant with the word "hearts" by saying, "...it represents the inner spiritual center of one's relationship with God...the core of their life."⁹

Paul knew that the seat of the human soul could be encouraged through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, the Greek word he used for encouragement was a verb form of the noun Jesus used as a title for the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). When believers walk in accordance with the principles of God's Word and the Person of the Holy Spirit, they receive the Lord's otherworldly, supernatural comfort in their souls. Paul had a burden for the believers of the Lycus Valley to experience such things. He knew the state of their local economy, along with the presence of false teaching in the church, was making discouragement grow.

On top of being encouraged, Paul wanted the churches of the Lycus Valley to be unified. He spoke of the way in which he wanted them to be "knit together in love." The original language of the text was literally used of knitting in the ancient world. It spoke of things being tied together in a physical sense. As used figuratively by Paul, it spoke of the mystical union that occurs amongst God's people through the indwelling presence of Christ (Ephesians 4:16). Paul would use the term in the same sense later in his letter to the Colossians (Colossians 2:19). Within the first century Lycus Valley, there was

⁹ Beale, G.K. *Colossians and Philemon: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 154.

undoubtedly a need for unity. Some were boasting of a special knowledge. Others were promoting prayers offered to angels (Colossians 2:18). Many were making a big deal out of ritualistic requirements associated with Jewish tradition (Colossians 2:16). In the midst of self-driven religion, Paul held up the bond of Christian love as the source of true unity.

Paul knew that “love” would solve the problems with division in the Lycus Valley. In writing, he used the famous Greek word for Christian love — “agapē.” It is important to clarify the meaning of Paul’s term. Humanity seems to have a tendency to twist and pervert the meaning of true love, God’s love. One has remarked on our need to define Christian love in light of Christ, saying, “...love is always defined by what God’s Word says it is.”¹⁰

The word “agapē” did not refer to romantic feelings, brotherly love, or family affection. Nor did it condone tolerance of sin, blind passivity to wrongdoing, or totalitarian acceptance of all things and all people. Agapē referred to a qualitatively different and better type of love. The word was used of a conscientious regard for others that was marked by servanthood and self-sacrifice (John 15:13). According to Jesus, such love is the greatest of all of God’s commands (Matthew 22:37-40). Because of our Lord’s teaching, Paul held up agapē as the greatest of all Christian virtues when writing to the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Scripture is clear. Believers are to live lives of love (Ephesians 5:2), setting their affections on the Lord and others. As they do, they will naturally do all that God desires (Galatians 5:14; Romans 13:10). Such faithful regard for others will lead them to edify their brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Corinthians 8:1) and it will produce a spirit of unity in the church (Philippians 2:1-2).

There is an older Christian praise song that says, “We are one in the bond of love.”¹¹ Though he wasn’t aware of that song, Paul would have agreed with its theology. Agapē love is the bond that produces oneness in the church. When individual believers die to selfish pursuits and pursue Christ, unity is the natural result. Such unity will bring great pleasure to the Lord and it will provide a powerful witness to Christ upon the Earth (John 17:21).

On top of achieving unity through love, Paul also desired for his readers to become strong in Christian truth. He said he wanted them “to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ.” Paul had made mention of both spiritual riches (Colossians 1:27) and the spiritual mystery of Christ (Colossians 1:26) earlier in his letter. He evoked both concepts once again in order to speak of his desire for his readers to have “assurance” in Christ.

The word rendered “assurance” is one that spoke of complete certainty and full confidence.¹² The idea expressed by the term involved assurance marked by personal

¹⁰ Kelly, Douglas F. A Response to The Decision of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, 23 May, 2011. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*: 575-576. (Edinburg, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2011), 44.

¹¹ *The Bond of Love*, Otis Skillings (1971).

¹² Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 316.

conviction.¹³ False teaching among the Lycus Valley was most likely causing some to doubt their salvation. It is for this reason that Paul would use the word translated “assurance” later in Colossians 4:12. Erroneous religious groups often like to keep their adherents on spiritual “thin ice” through deceptive doctrines. Such seems to have been the case with the Gnostics at Colossae and Laodicea. Paul knew his readers needed their assurance boosted.

Paul wanted his readers to be assured and confident in their salvation. He indicated, however, that such assurance was based on “understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery.” The word for “knowledge” was a compound word. It was made up of two words — epí and gnōsis. The word literally meant “upon knowledge.” The second word in the compound word was the cherished word for the Gnostic heretics. They derived the name for their movement from the term. They were fond of talking about their supposed secret knowledge and profound mysteries. Paul employed their term against them, indicating that true knowledge, a deeper knowledge, an “upon knowledge” — was found in Christ. (Colossians 1:27)

At times, believers can lose the assurance of their salvation. Sometimes indwelling sin is the cause of such doubts. On other occasions, false teaching is the culprit. In each instance, a more thorough understanding of the true knowledge of Christ is the remedy. It is for this reason that Paul expressed a desire for his readers to become stronger in “understanding” and “knowledge.”

It is also for this reason that Paul spoke of “riches” associated with assurance. Though Paul’s opponents used the term, he employed it in a gospel sense. He was well aware of the poverty that can result from a lack of Christian assurance. He was also aware of the riches and joy that come from full assurance. Thus, he expressed his desire for his readers to gain a confidence in Christ.

Verse 3

Paul continued his discussion concerning his desire for the churches of the Lycus Valley by saying, “...in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3). The use of the personal pronoun at the beginning of verse 3 was a reference to Christ. Interestingly, Paul used what is known as the “locative” form of the pronoun, depicting Christ as the location in which all the treasures of God’s wisdom are found.¹⁴

The Gnostics like to boast of “hidden” secrets contained in their teaching. They used the term Paul used for “hidden” in verse 3 to speak of such secrets. The term is the Greek one from which we get our word “apocrypha.” Paul employed it to speak of the way all of God’s truth is found in Christ. Though the Gnostics minimized and marginalized God’s Son, Paul maintained that all truth was found in Him. To emphasize such realities, he metaphorically spoke of “treasures of wisdom and knowledge” being hidden in Christ.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹⁴ Robertson, Archibald Thomas. *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume IV, The Epistles of Paul.* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1931), 488.

The Greek word for “treasures” was one from which we get our English word “Thesaurus,” which is a “treasury” of words. It was used of storehouses of riches in the ancient world.¹⁵ Communities often had strategically guarded storehouses or coffers.¹⁶ Ancient rabbinical tradition often applied the word to supposed realms of heavenly treasure.¹⁷ Jesus Himself alluded to such Hebrew folklore in his teaching (Matthew 6:2). In his letter to the Colossians, Paul implemented the concept to oppose heretics who viewed spiritual knowledge as a hard-to-find treasure. For them, spiritual insight was only available to the spiritually elite; it was hidden to the common person.

Paul wanted Christians in the Lycus Valley to be liberated from such lies. He wanted them to know that, in Christ, they possessed both “wisdom and knowledge.” His word for “wisdom” referred to the application of knowledge to life. One has referred to it as “skills in the affairs of life...including the idea of sound judgment and good sense.”¹⁸ From the number of references Paul made to wisdom in his letter (Colossians 1:28; 3:16; and 4:5), it seems the Gnostic spoke of it frequently. The apostle wanted his readership to know that real skill for life was found in the person and precepts of Jesus. To know how to live, one needed to look no further than Christ.

The latter word, “knowledge,” was the famous catch-word of the Gnostics. As opposed to the elevated, experiential knowledge, referred to in verse 2 with the word “knowledge” (epignōsis), this “knowledge” (gnōsis) was an intellectual type. It was used in various contexts to speak of pieces, principles, and precepts of information. The Gnostics were infatuated with fragmentary information about supposed super-secret spiritual realms. Paul wanted believers to shun such high-sounding, heretical teachings.

The real believers at Colossae had no need for so-called super-spiritual information that had no bearing on real life. They had all they needed for life and godliness in Christ. Concerning on the priority of the knowledge of Christ, Calvin said, “...all that think that they know anything of God apart from Christ, contrive to themselves an idol in the place of God...we are perfect in wisdom if we truly know Christ, so that it is madness to wish to know anything besides Him.”¹⁹ Believers of all generations can look to Christ for the wisdom, insight, and understanding they need.

¹⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹⁶ Robertson, 488.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 463.

¹⁸ Zodiates, [CD-Rom].

¹⁹ Calvin, 175.