

Colossians 1:21-2:7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Colossians chapter 1 verse 21 to chapter 2 verse 7. And you who were once alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he is now reconciled in the body of his flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. 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, 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, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

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.

[1 : 44] 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.

Following on from the great hymn concerning Christ in verses 15-20, the end of Colossians chapter 1 moves on to unpack dimensions of its significance. Paul has praised the majesty of Christ, both in the original creation order and in the new creation. The one by whom all things were created is the one by whom all things are reconciled to himself by the blood of his cross.

The Colossians are part of this reconciliation. Paul contrasts their former state as pagans to that which they were brought into by God's grace. Formerly they were alienated, hostile to God in their very thinking and evil in their actions. Mindset and action together were at odds with God and his holiness and truth. However, now they have been reconciled by the body of Christ's flesh in his death, so that they can now be presented before him as holy, blameless and above reproach. The means of their reconciliation was Christ's body of flesh by his death.

Christ, the one in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, assumed our flesh, and not just flesh in general. Christ came as a representative man, a new Adam and the Messiah, and he bears his body on the cross the full penalty of his people's sins. As we are brought into his body, sin has been decisively dealt with, and we can be restored and transformed into his image, being remade in the one who is the image of the invisible God. The purpose of our redemption is that we might be presented holy and blameless. Our setting apart by God in holiness is not merely an afterthought of our deliverance from the punishment of our sins, it's the point of it all.

As God's redeemed people, we are to be without blemish and without reproach, purified from the stain of sin and justified from its guilt. All of this requires that we continue in the faith.

[3 : 45] The work of the Spirit by which we endure in faith to the end is a necessary aspect of our salvation. It is by the work of the Spirit that we are brought from God's declaration that we are in good standing before him on account of Christ's work, to the reaffirmation of that declaration on the

last day, when, in a judgment of our entire lives and works, God declares us to be in good standing with him.

Paul speaks of the worldwide proclamation of the gospel to every creature, or in all creation, under heaven. Paul is probably speaking in an anticipatory sense here, of the way that the gospel, the good news that the kingdom of God is established in the lordship of Jesus the Messiah, has been sent forth into the entire world, through the ministry of Paul and other messengers like him.

The message hasn't yet reached everyone, but it has been sent out. In the verses that follow, Paul presents the Colossians, who have yet to meet him, with a portrait of himself as a minister of the gospel. In the most surprising statement in this section, he claims that not only is he suffering for their sake, but that he is filling up in his flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church. Paul believes that Christians must enter into and participate in Christ's sufferings as part of the passage into the new age of the resurrection. Christ doesn't just suffer for his church, but also as an example for and representative of his church and bride, and his bride must join with him in his suffering. Paul's sufferings are not the redemptive sufferings of Christ, but the tribulation that Christ experienced and which he foretold would come upon his people. As we share the fellowship of Christ's sufferings, we join with him in tribulation.

These tribulations are the birth pangs of the new creation. Christ has entered into this new creation ahead of us. Through the birth pangs of the cross and the rebirth of the resurrection, we follow in his footsteps. Paul, as the apostle to the Gentiles, wishes to shelter those to whom he is ministering from the worst of the tribulation that is coming upon the church, by taking as much as he can upon himself. Recognising that his sufferings aren't meaningless, but indeed are part of the process by which a new creation is coming to birth, Paul can rejoice in them, knowing that they aren't futile or in vain. The work of the proclamation of the gospel still needs to be completed, and it is through the suffering and the labours of people like Paul that this work is taking place. Paul was made a servant of the church with a very special and particular mission. He was given stewardship of a great mystery of divine revelation that now in the fullness of time must be announced. Paul isn't just one of many missionaries. He is someone with a special and unique calling in redemptive history. The key import of the mystery is the salvation that is being made known in Christ, a salvation given to Gentiles as well as to Jews, as Christ dwells in his people, assuring them of the fullness of salvation yet to be realised. Christ has reconciled God and man by the cross, and now the news is being sent out to all. Christ is what Paul is all about. The entire intent of his mission is to bring people into the Messiah, and to bring them up to maturity in him, so that on the last day they might be presented holy, blameless and without reproach before him. Paul works towards this end, labouring with a God-given drive and energy that is powerfully at work within him. Paul is warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom. Not a hidden wisdom for a few privileged enlightened persons, but a wisdom that is directed to and designed for everyone. Even though Paul has yet to meet them, Paul wants the Colossians to know that he has been struggling for them, and for the church at Laodicea and other people that he has yet to meet. How is he doing this? Well, presumably first of all, through prayer. He prays constantly for the churches. This is an introductory theme in almost all of his letters. He is also building up the church in the wider regions. He's training, he's equipping, and sending missionaries and teachers to these various churches, even if he's not visiting himself, and he's writing letters to be circulated around them. Paul is working to establish a larger church movement, a church movement that will strengthen every single individual church within it. As the apostle to the

[8 : 02] Gentiles, he feels an especial responsibility to seek the upbuilding of all the different churches within these networks. His desire is that they will be encouraged and united, so that they will achieve the full conviction of the knowledge of the mystery of God, which is Christ himself.

Everything is contained in Christ, all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He is the key to the whole thing. Paul, however, is concerned that they are not misled, that they never lose sight of all that they possess in Christ, no matter what clever arguments people might put forward.

He may not be there with them in body, but he is with them in every other way that matters. He's very concerned for their growth, constantly praying for them, seeking to do what he can to build them up, even from prison. And he's encouraged by the progress that they are making. In the last chapter or so, he has presented the most dazzling portrait of Christ. He is the one over all creation. He's the one through whom the new creation comes. He is the mystery hidden before all ages, and the one in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. They have received this

Jesus, and they must walk in this Jesus. It is in him that they must put down their roots. It is from him that they must draw all of their sustenance and find their strength and their security. A question to consider. The term Christ-centred is often overused as a sort of positive brand name to be attached to all sorts of different things. How might Paul's teaching to this point of Colossians help us to give a fuller and more substantial account of what being centred on Christ actually means?