

Colossian Series Part 6

²⁹ 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,

² 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,

³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

⁵ 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.

When you think about struggling, what do you think about? Oftentimes when we are faced with any kind of a struggle in life, we tend to think of that struggle as a problem. The thing about struggling is that it can be both a good and a bad thing. There are some things that we can only get through struggling. I don't know of any parent that's ever potty trained a child who did not struggle through that, but I would say that the end product of that struggle is something that is quite good. The same thing is true for many of the other developmental things that we have in life. And yet, once we get through the struggle, we discover a joy and a delight on the other side of that struggle. But there are times when struggling is indeed a bad thing. When you can't seem to break a bad habit, and you keep going back into that bad habit time and again. That struggle does in fact, hurt us. When we read our text a few moments ago, we saw that Paul struggled for the churches. He's desiring that the Church will learn something. And in the process of learning this thing, they will get something out of it. Paul struggled for the churches to embrace all of Christ. I'll say that one more time. Paul struggled for the churches to embrace all of Christ. In his mind, the church needs to know who Jesus is, what he has done, and from that knowledge, they will be able to stand up against all of the challenges and difficulties that are coming.

In our text, the apostle Paul is thinking about the challenges that are going to be facing the church. He is trying to get the churches to embrace is all of who Jesus is. So if we were to think of a general application before we dig into the specifics of this text it would be this: if we embrace Christ completely, we can be ready for all the struggles that will come in our lives. If we embrace Christ completely, we can be ready for all the struggles that will come in our lives.

Our text starts in Colossians 1:29 and chapter 2 verse 1. Paul says that he is struggling for the churches. He says "For this I toil." What is he toiling for? It's to present everyone mature in Christ, which is what

he said in verse 28. Paul's goal is for all the churches to be mature and for the members of the churches to be mature disciples.

Why is it such a toil? I think it's a toil for a couple of reasons. First, in Colossians 2:1, he says, that there are some people who haven't seen him face to face. Paul continues in verse five. He says that he is absent in the body from these churches. So because he separated from the churches, he has to work even harder to do his work. Another reason the Apostle Paul is likely toiling or thinks of this work as a toil is that it requires a diligence and a consistency.

Toiling doesn't necessarily mean hard work. It can also mean consistent work. The Apostle Paul has already said in chapter one, verse 25, that he has become a "minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you to make the Word of God fully known." That work is quite difficult. I cannot imagine the sense of duty and pressure that he had to do the work of making the Word of God fully known to the people. And in that way, it required consistency and longevity in the work. At this point in Paul's ministry, he's suffering in prison in Rome, and dealing with all sorts of anxieties about what's going to happen to him in the future. And so his desire to communicate the whole gospel of Christ with the churches from prison is quite a difficult challenge. But he is not doing this alone. It's not his own work. It's the work of God.

He says, in Verse 29, "for this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within." This is something that when we hear Paul say, we think oh man, the apostle Paul is unbelievable. He is an unbelievable Christian. He has the power of God. Wow. The apostle Paul is amazing. But we can have the same energy. What's more is that I think we already have this energy working in us.

Why do I say that? Well, first of all, just like Paul says, in Verse 24, of chapter one, "now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church." As we looked at that verse last time, we said that, because Paul is in Christ and Christ is in Paul, that Paul's sufferings are really Christ's sufferings; that the things that he endures in the name of Christ are really not his own. Paul views those things as really belonging to Jesus, and that Jesus is working in him to do those things. And we said that this is what it means to be a Christian. In a way, this is what it means to be in Christ, to be one with Jesus. Jesus says he is with us and we are with him. That same Christ who is with him in his sufferings is also supplying him with the endurance and the energy that he needs to do the work that he's already doing. So Paul views his sufferings as Christ's sufferings and his efforts as Christ's efforts. And this is not just a matter of perspective, this is the true spiritual reality. The ability that we have to endure in the Christian life is really due to God working in us. This is the power that is also working through us as we labor in Christ's kingdom.

Now in verses four and five, Paul says, I say all of these things, in order "that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

For though I am absent in the body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith." So why is Paul working so hard for these churches? The church was facing some challenges at that time. They were likely to face more challenges in the future. The question that follows on the heels of that is what kind of challenges are the churches facing? If you read through

chapter 2 of Colossians you will have a hint of what is going on. Roughly speaking, we can imagine the church has two main challenges. One is legalism and the other is syncretism. Legalism is what happens when you try to add tangible limits to what is and what is not faith in Jesus. Usually it takes the form of strict rules for conduct that are not commanded by God's Word. On the other hand syncretism is a challenge to the church that blends human philosophy and culture with the gospel. This is especially troubling when the gospel message is changed to fit into a certain culture.

This was happening in the Colossian church and one reason he is writing to them. The Apostle Paul is concerned that the churches are going to succumb in some way to these challenges. Now, what makes these challenges to the Christian life so powerful? Paul takes these challenges seriously because he calls them plausible. Look again at verse four.

He says, "I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." In other words, the challenges to the church appeal to people in some way that make them seem plausible. Because something is possible or plausible, doesn't make it true. There are many things that, when presented to you in a certain way, in an appealing way, seem quite plausible. And the challenges that we face as Christians are going to confront us in some way that make us weaker in our faith or distract us from our goal. Legalism and syncretism are challenging us today. Any time we place a restraint on someone's conscience that is not clearly taught in Scripture we are engaging in a form of legalism. However, the typical form that legalism takes is when we judge others or ourselves for not being good enough. When we sin, our response should be repentance, not beating ourselves up. Jesus' death covers us. God's grace is sufficient. On the other hand, we find ourselves tempted to blend culture into the teaching of the church all the time. I think the most pervasive form of syncretism in the church is the world's understanding of prosperity. Global culture says that we can only be really happy when we have lots of pleasure. Scripture says we are happy when we are in Christ. Despite the challenges we face, we have hope.

Back in Colossians 2:5, Paul says, "For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit rejoicing to see your good order in the firmness of your faith in Christ." Paul was hopeful even though he wasn't present with them. They were standing firm in their faith in Jesus. They had good order. The Apostle Paul was not worried about them. He was not grieving, and his struggle for them was not a burden on him. He was rejoicing because of the steadfastness of their faith.

How do we have good order and firmness of faith in Christ? In verses two and three, it says this "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." Paul's expressed desire is that the people of God have their hearts encouraged. And he mentions two ways that their hearts would be encouraged.

The first is being knit together in love. Now, we're all from very different backgrounds. But every Christian in the world has something in common. We have faith in Christ Jesus. Jesus loved us and saved us. The Triune God loves us. Because of that great love, we are told that we should love one another. And even more than this, Jesus said that the world would know that we are His disciples by the way we love one another. The kind of love that Paul is talking about here has a couple of key

components. First, it is modeled on the love of Jesus. Jesus showed us that love means lowering yourself to serve other people. He humbled himself to the point of dying for us. There is no greater love than that. The second component is the love we see God displaying in the OT. God made a promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He made promises to his people in the desert. He made promises to David and to other kings in Israel. God promises to care for and to be with the people. Even though God had to discipline the people from time to time, he always kept his promises. Ultimately, God kept his promise even to the point of sending his own Son to die for his people. If we learn to love like this we will be faithful to keep our word and serve one another with gladness. Someone may wonder where the love is in this picture of love. All I have done is talk about keeping promises and serving. When we understand the depth of Christ's love for us and for his people we can see where the love is. Love is not a mere feeling of infatuation. It is not less than a feeling, but it is more than a feeling of attraction. To love like God loves his people is to desire that good things happen to other people. Paul says we are encouraged when our hearts are knit together in love. As everyone in the church joins together in selfless service and faithfulness to the gospel everyone is brought together. Our lives are woven together as we all look out for and serve one another.

The second way that Paul desires for the churches to be encouraged is "to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery which is Christ." So far in Colossians 1 and 2, Paul has referred to Jesus as God's mystery twice and explained who Jesus is at least two other times. In a space of 35 or so verses, at least half of that is used just in reminding the church about how important Jesus is. This time there are few new additions to the description. Paul says that in Christ all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. He says that there are riches of assurance in the knowledge and understanding of Christ. Paul is clearly saying that by knowing Christ we will be encouraged. I hear a lot about 悩み (nayami) in Japan. I hear about it in sermons and I hear it when I hear people talking as I move around the city. It is natural for us not to know what we should do in every situation. We really cannot be expected to know what to do in every circumstance because we do not know the future. Sometimes we cannot recognize our friends from our enemies. In Christ, there is help with all of these kinds of things. Maybe we will not be given precise answers about every step of our lives, but we will be given the strength to move forward and a higher purpose to guide our steps. You see, we should have our eyes up from the daily struggles and uncertainties of life. If our minds are full of the things of Christ, we will be able to see more clearly what is really important for our lives, as well as what is challenging us.

Now, that is an abstract sort of thought so let's take this idea of embracing and understanding the full riches of the wisdom and knowledge of Christ and make it more practical. What can you do to embrace these things? What can you do to hold on to these things?

The first thing I think about is this. We need to embrace the theology of the Bible. So if we want to be encouraged and to be able to stand up against plausible arguments that are going to be coming up against us, we need to dedicate ourselves to the theology of the Bible. It's not enough for us to say that we don't understand theology. There are a lot of things we will never understand. There are a lot of things that we don't have answers to when someone asks us right away. It's okay that we don't have all the answers. We're not even supposed to have all the answers. But we need to be growing. I still get questions that I do not know the answer to right away. There is no minimum amount of knowledge we

need to be useful to God, but the more we know of Christ the more encouragement from him we will receive. We can grow in Christ together through Bible studies and listening to sermons together. However, we also have the responsibility of growing in our knowledge of the Lord.

The second practical thing we can think about is this. We cannot exhaust the wisdom and power of Christ by relying on him too much. So when in doubt, fear, triumph, or the daily grind of life, we should be calling out to the Lord all the time. There is no way to go beyond Christ's power. There's no way to ask God for too much help. There's no way to say to the Lord too many times, "I don't understand. Can you help me?" If you are really, truly seeking answers to your questions, and you're really, truly seeking the Lord, then ask, and God will be there. He will always be there when we call out to him. It may sound a little crazy to think that God comes when we call. It's not that God is waiting on a word from us to do something. It's not that he's our servant. It's that he wants to be our God. He wants to dwell with us. He wants us to dwell with Him, and He wants us to be His people. And in this relationship, when we draw near to Him, He does draw near to us.

Third, we need to practice the Christian life. Now that may strike you as a weird thing. What does it mean to practice the Christian life? Well, I'm gonna answer that. But I want you to know that the practice of the Christian life is something you've probably already heard of, and many of you are already doing. We can sum up the Christian life like this: committing ourselves to Scripture reading and prayer, taking part in the sacraments of the church, and lastly serving one another. Daily reading the Scriptures and prayer is something that Christians have been doing since the very beginning of the church. I encourage you all to get a Bible reading plan and get a book of prayers to help guide your prayers. The sacraments of the church are baptism and the Lord's Supper. Some might prefer the term ordinances rather than sacraments, but either way the Lord Jesus commanded his church to practice these things. Lastly, we are regularly encouraged by the Scriptures to serve one another in the church. For the strength of this church and your own Christian life, practice the Christian faith.

Lastly, Paul wanted the church to be ready for challenges. We are to stand firm in Christ. Paul wants to present everyone mature in Christ. That goal has not changed for us today. In some ways, the world has changed a lot since Paul wrote this letter to the Colossians. We have so much more technology and freedom to move around, and many, many other things. However, in some other ways, the world is not changed. The same temptations exist in the world and in our hearts. It seems easier to be called away by temptations than to stand firm on the gospel. If we stand firm on Christ, the world will feel like it's leaving us behind. But the truth is, we are leaving the world behind. We are pressing on toward the Triune God and we will be pilgrims passing through this life with our eyes set on heavenly realities. And as we press toward this, we will leave the world behind. That might be a difficult thought for you. Stand firm on what we have received from Christ Jesus. When we feel the pull towards the world, remember that we have left the world behind. We are passing through this world as citizens of Christ's kingdom.