

Growing Up: Labouring for Christ

Goldstone Church – 31-Jan-16 10:30am

Colossians 1:21-2:3

Introduction

We continue our series in the book of Colossians. Over the last few weeks we've looked at the Context; why the letter was written. We've studied Paul's opening prayer for the Colossian church; thanking God for them. Last week we saw that everything must be about Jesus; you can't add and you can't improve upon Jesus.

This passage addresses a personal attack the false teachers in Colossae had been aiming towards the Apostle Paul. They were trying to discredit Paul, trying to raise doubts in people's minds. Effectively, they were saying, "Why are you listening to a man who is a political prisoner locked up in a prison in Rome?" "How can you believe that what Paul is saying is true when you've never met the man?"

On the face of it, these seem reasonable questions. We know that Paul had never visited Colossae, and he had only met a few the Colossian Christians personally. It seems reasonable to ask about Paul – if that is all it was.

However, the false teachers were trying to discredit Paul as a way of discrediting his message. If they could cast doubts on Paul's character and motivation, then, by association, they could cast doubts on the message Paul was preaching.

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is not the ultimate target. The false teachers were targeting Paul as a roundabout way to undermine the Gospel. The ultimate target for the false teachers was Jesus Christ. However, as we saw last week, Jesus Christ is out of their league. Jesus Christ is supreme.

I believe that the Apostle Paul had heard about these attempts to discredit him, so he pauses in his letter and gives some words of explanation. Up to now, Paul has been totally focused on exalting and promoting Jesus Christ; he hasn't said anything about himself. In these verses he gives a wonderful explanation of his ministries.

1. SHARING THE GOSPEL

(Colossians 1:21-23)

Although the Apostle Paul didn't visit Colossae personally, his preaching ministry in nearby Ephesus resulted in the Colossian church being established. Paul says (v.23) that "*This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed ... and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*"

The first ministry that we often associate with Paul is to preach and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The existence of the Colossian church proves that Paul was doing what God had called him to do; he was sharing the Gospel.

Paul reminds the Colossians about their own experience with the Gospel. Paul describes them (v.21a) as previously being "alienated" and "enemies" of God (see also Ephesians 2:11). The Colossians were separated/ cut off from the spiritual blessings of

Israel. Whatever gods they had worshipped in the past, nothing was able to remove their sin and guilt.

But through Jesus Christ, they have been reconciled to God; through his love and grace, the sin and guilt had been removed and they are united and brought into relationship with God.

Aside: in v.22, Paul emphasises the physical body of Jesus that was nailed on the cross to challenge and overturn the false teachers who taught that Jesus did not have a real human body. As 1 Peter 2:24 also says, Jesus did have a fully-human body, and that fully-human body bore our sins on the cross at Calvary.

Paul tells the Colossians that they are no longer aliens or foreigners; they are fully united and reconciled to God. Paul uses 3 wonderful phrases (v.22) to describe the Colossian Christians:

- a) '*Holy in His Sight*'. They have been set apart and devoted to God. They are special in God's sight.
- b) '*Without Blemish*'. Like the animals used for the temple sacrifices needed to be perfect, God looks on His people and sees them free of any defect or sin.
- c) '*Free from Accusation*'. God will never accept any charges or accusations that the Devil may throw in our direction. As God's people we are free.

A challenge of being a Christian for a while is that it is easy to forget what it was like *before* we became a Christian; it is easy to take for granted what it means to be reconciled to God. This is a wonderful gift of grace and love from God.

But having heard and received this Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we in turn are being called to share the Gospel with others.

Note: we don't share the Gospel with others to earn points with God. Rather, we share the Gospel in response to the grace and love that God has shown us in the first place.

2. SUFFERING FOR THE GOSPEL (Colossians 1:24-27)

The false teachers in Colossae probably enjoyed emphasising that Paul was a political prisoner in Rome. His imprisonment would have been seen as a weapon they could use to fight against the truth of the Gospel that Paul was proclaiming. In their eyes, Paul is a convicted criminal.

The Apostle Paul turns this weapon around and uses it to defeat the false teachers; even using this issue to build a closer relationship with the Colossians. Paul says (v.24) that, instead of being ashamed that he was suffering in prison, he was actually *rejoicing* in the whole experience! Paul was rejoicing for 3 reasons:

1. He was suffering because of Jesus Christ.

Because of his allegiance, dedication and faithfulness to Jesus, Paul rejoiced that

he had been found worthy to suffer for the sake of Christ. Paul was not suffering because he was a criminal, but suffering because he was faithfully following Jesus.

2. Paul was suffering because of the *Gentile* Christians.

As a Jew, Paul could have had an easy life by only associating himself with other Jews. But God had called him as an Apostle to the Gentiles, and he was faithful to that calling. When Paul had preached in Jerusalem that salvation was for *both* the Jews and Gentiles, the Jews were incensed, arrested him and handed him over to the Romans for execution. Paul was suffering because he was faithfully following Jesus among and for Gentile Christians.

3. Paul was suffering for the sake of the church.

Earlier in Paul's life, he had persecuted the church. But now, Paul had devoted his life to care for and to nurture the church. The fact that Paul was a prisoner did not stop him from ministering to the church. Paul was suffering because he was faithfully following Jesus among Gentile Christians meeting in churches.

It's easy to think that suffering for the Gospel of Jesus Christ is something that only happened in the Bible. Sadly, this is not the case. Suffering for the Gospel of Jesus Christ is happening now – and close to home.

For the Apostle Paul, suffering for the Gospel was not a negative issue. Instead, suffering for the Gospel was something to rejoice about. Even today, those suffering for the Gospel can rejoice that their circumstances are a consequence of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

Jesus never said that he would take away our problems, only that he would be with us through them; Matthew 5:10, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*"

Even in a season hardship, God's blessing, grace and love is being poured out on you.

3. STRIVING FOR THE GOSPEL (Colossians 1:28-2:3)

The Apostle Paul was Striving for the Gospel in prayer – praying that the Colossians will mature and grow in their faith.

In the original Greek, "strenuously contend" (v.29) and "contending for" (v.1) are athletic terms, referring to the strenuous effort that a runner makes to win a race. Our English word "agony" comes from this same word. The Apostle Paul is striving and agonising in prayer that the Colossians will mature and grow in their faith.

We may be familiar with descriptions of Paul as a "preacher" or "teacher" (v.28), but this passage also presents Paul as a 'Prayer Warrior'. He is agonising in prayer over the Colossians, praying that they will mature and grow in their faith.

Q. What are the evidences of spiritual maturity?

Paul outlines (v.2) four evidences of spiritual maturity:

a) **Encouragement.** “*encouraged in heart*”.

Shallow and superficial sympathy usually makes people feel worse. True spiritual encouragement makes people feel better and uplifted.

Question: do you encourage people?

b) **Endearment.** “*united in love*”.

Mature Christians love people and seek to be peacemakers, not troublemakers. The bias is towards spiritual unity, not selfish division.

Question: do you endear yourself to people?

c) **Enrichment.** “*the full riches of complete understanding*”.

Mature Christians don't complain about what they don't have. Instead, they make use of the huge resources that they do have in Jesus Christ.

Question: do you make full use of your spiritual gifts and resources?

d) **Enlightenment.** “*to know the mystery of God*”.

Mature Christians have a complete assurance that they are a child of God. They have studied the Bible and understand wholeheartedly God's promises and assurance of eternal life through Jesus.

Question: do you have a complete assurance that you are a child of God?

Praying for spiritual maturity in fellow Christians brings a new meaning to Striving for the Gospel.

Quote: “Prayer is not us trying to change God's mind. But rather, prayer is us learning what is the mind of God and asking accordingly.”

Paul was Striving for the Gospel in prayer.

CONCLUSION

In this passage, the Apostle Paul is explaining his ministries; outlining what God has called him to do, and how he is doing it. In response to the glorious truths and supremacy of Christ declared in previous verses, Paul is telling us how he is practically responding to these truths. God is inviting us to follow Paul's example.

- Having heard and responded to the Gospel ourselves, God is inviting us to **Share the Gospel** with others. As a reflection of our personal, love-relationship with God, we are being called to take every opportunity to share our experiences with others.
- If we are going through a season where we are **Suffering for the Gospel**, God is inviting us to stay faithful; keep following Jesus – and even rejoice in our struggles.
- Lastly, God is inviting us to **Strive for the Gospel** is prayer; to be Prayer Warriors, praying for spiritual maturity in our fellow Christians. Let's pray that:
 - a. We will be an *Encouragement* to those that we meet; building people up.

- b. We will have an *Endearment* to those that we meet; to be peacemakers and unity builders.
- c. We will be an *Enrichment* to those that we meet; making use of the resources we have in Jesus Christ.
- d. We will be an *Enlightenment* to those that we meet; living out the complete assurance that we have, that we are a child of God.

In Jesus Name,

Amen