

Colossians 2:1-5
“Paul’s Perspective on Ministry”

Introduction:

While the previous passage (1:24-29) was about Paul’s stewardship of the Gospel in a general sense, this passage was about his specific labors on behalf of the saints in Colossae and Laodicea. Additionally, this passage forms a transition in which Paul moves from writing about the theological truth that Christ is Lord over the Church and introduces his primary concern in the letter, addressing the teachings that were undermining Christ’s lordship in the Colossian fellowship. The central truth Paul intended to convey in this passage was that in Christ one finds the repository of all the treasures of Divine wisdom and knowledge.

Finally, these few verses reveal that Paul’s form of pastoral ministry was not distant or aloof, but vulnerable, directed, Christocentric, apologetic and affirming.

I. Paul’s Aspiration for the Colossian Saints: (vs.1-3)

Paul opened this passage by writing, *“For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh”* (vs.1). Although Paul had never met most of the Colossian Christians personally. In expressing his longing for them, Paul was following a traditional pattern found in ancient letters that express friendship and affection.

The conjunction *“for”* introduces a clause wherein he would reinforce what he had stated in the previous verse (*to this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily*). While the words *“I want you to know”* highlighted the significance of what follows. The function of this phrase is similar to two others that Paul employed elsewhere, *“you know that”* (3:24; 4:1) and *“don’t you know”* (Rom.6:16; I Cor.3:16). Paul wrote about having a great conflict for the saints in Colossae and Laodicea. The Greek word translated as *“conflict”* refers to strife, to contention, or to some sort of contest for victory as one strove to have mastery over another person. This term was often used to refer to competitions in both the Roman and Greek games. These athletic competitions were a major element of Roman and Greek societies. Therefore, they were commonly used to illustrate things that a person might strive for that required rigorous effort. In addition, this Greek word translated as *“conflict”* was built on the same root as the Greek word translated as *“striving”* in the previous verse (1:29). The specific *“conflict”* that Paul was referring to here was his spiritual warfare in prayer against the principalities and powers on behalf of the Colossian saints. Paul qualified here that this conflict was *“for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh”*. The use of the word *“face”* in the Biblical languages often expressed the idea of personal presence, as in the modern expression, face-to-face. While the word *“flesh”* here is simply a reference to Paul’s physical presence. In writing this, Paul wanted to stress that the toil and conflict that he endured on behalf of converts was not only for those whom he had personally led to Christ, but also for those who had come into the faith through the ministries of others. Paul’s words here were written in

light of his desire to fulfill the mission given to him by Christ. He knew that it would be advantageous to the Gentile churches for them to have firsthand contact with him. Therefore, he wanted the opportunity to know and encourage these Gentile saints personally. Therefore, the emotional struggle he wrote about here also had the dimension of wishing to faithfully fulfill his calling.

What is written here makes it clear that Paul had not started this or the other churches in the Lycus Valley. And the mention of Laodicea (4:16) implies that the heresy Paul was about to address had spread there too. Some scholars have argued that Paul didn't mention the church at Hierapolis because the Gospel had not yet taken root there as successfully as it did in Colossae and Laodicea. These scholars argue that this conclusion is supported by the fact that the Apostle John was not given a message for this church when he wrote to the churches in the province of Asia about the revelation he received several years later (Rev.2-3). History does reveal that a church did flourish in Hierapolis in later years, though the precise date it was founded is unknown. Another plausible explanation for why there is no reference to this church is that the false teaching that was affecting Colossae and Laodicea had either not affected the church of Hierapolis or had not affected it to the point that it was relevant for Paul to mention it here.

Paul then wrote about the content of his conflict for these saints, *“that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ”* (vs.2). The reference to the *“heart”* as that which Paul sought to encourage, must be understood as a reference to be the entire inner person. The Greek word translated as *“encouraged”* has the basic meaning of calling someone to the side of another. Beyond this basic meaning, the word can have many different nuances depending on the context in which it is used. It can refer not only to encouragement, but to exhortation, to consolation, to entreaty, to comfort, or to instruction. The idea throughout these nuances is verbally aiding someone to continue in some endeavor. The translation *“encouraged”* best fits the flow of thought here. The way Paul sought to accomplish this encouragement was through these saints being *“knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ”*. The Greek word translated as *“knit together”* refers to bringing things together so that either they may be joined to each other, or that they may be compared to one another. The first meaning is clearly in view here. The participial form of the word indicates it is the means by which the encouragement was to be accomplished. The love that is referred to here is the love that Christ had for them. His love provided a basis for unity among them and formed a common bond between them. The reality is that Christian growth is fully accomplished with the context of the fellowship as a whole, not by isolated individuals. The Greek word translated as *“full assurance”* is a compound word meaning fully convinced or completely persuaded about something. The Greek word translated as *“understanding”* referred to comprehending or reasoning something out. The words *“of full assurance”* in Greek represents a genitive of

content, while “*of understanding*” represents a genitive of source. With the prepositional phrase “*of the full assurance of understanding*” Paul was providing an emphatic statement that highlighted complete conviction and understanding as the additional means by which these saints might be “*encouraged*” to persevere. Paul focused on how these believers needed to be fully convinced about the truth, and that this conviction needed to be rooted in a complete understanding of the redemptive plan of God. It was for this understanding that Paul was willing to suffer on their behalf. Paul knew, that if these saints were to persevere in their faith (having the courage to go on despite whatever resistance they might face) they needed to have a deep and profound understanding of what was available to them from the Father and in Christ, and this needed to be reinforced in each one by their mutual fellowship with one another. If they were not fully persuaded by these things, if their hearts were not filled with the spiritual truths about Christ, then they would be vulnerable to the false teachings they were being exposed to.

In Paul’s earlier prayer for the Colossians (1:9-14), what he wrote could be understood simply in individual terms, but the hope he expressed here is clearly focused on their well-being as a community.

The winning of hearts completely to Christ was at the core of Paul’s ministry, because when a person’s heart has been thoroughly won over and established in grace, the entire person will become the object of God’s marvelous transforming power, for the heart is the fulcrum of feeling and faith as well as the wellspring of words and actions (Prov.4:23; Matt.12:34; Rom.10:10). The heart is the core and center of a person’s being, his or her innermost self. The idea here is that Paul wanted these saints to flourish in their Christian lives, and for this to happen, their hearts needed to be saturated with those things that could be found in Christ alone.

In contrast to those who would try to intellectualize the Christian faith, speaking of knowledge (gnosis) as if it were an end in itself, Paul emphasized that the revelation of God cannot be properly known and obeyed apart from the cultivation of brotherly love within the Christian community.

Next Paul wrote, “*in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (vs.3). The relative pronoun “*whom*” of course refers to Christ, who was mentioned at the end of the previous verse. This is the eighth reference to what is found in Christ. This repetition represents a sustained motif in this letter, and thus it indicates that this is an important idea in this letter.

As noted in the discussion on “*mystery*” in the previous chapter, the sense of the hiddenness that Paul wrote about here was something hidden in order for it to be unearthed, not hidden in order to remain concealed. Also the use of the language of hiddenness is a further indication that Paul was arguing against Gnostic-type false teachings. The combination of the terms “*hidden*” and “*treasures*” was a natural one, then and now, since hiding a treasure was often the measure of securing and protecting it. The Greek word translated as “*treasures*” can refer to a literal box that holds valuable objects that cost a great deal of money, or more generally it can refer to that which is of exceptional value and kept safe. The word “*wisdom*” refers to practical knowledge, the ability to understand reality from God’s perspective and

to act on that understanding. In Greek, the words “*of wisdom and knowledge*” are in the form of genitive nouns. These should be considered genitives of content, thus providing a description of what all the treasures consist of. The focus here is on the word “*all*”, which stresses that the readers possessed this richness and therefore did not need to seek it elsewhere (in the end it would be discovered that what the heretics were pointing to as true knowledge, was merely an illusion). There is a background to the use of this phrase in Old Testament wisdom literature, specifically in Proverbs 2:1-8. This would have enabled Paul’s Jewish readers in particular to see more clearly that Jesus was the embodiment of the wisdom and understanding that God in the OT had urged them to pursue. Additionally, the inclusion of the word “*all*” in this flow of thought conveys that these things are found in Christ alone, therefore, all that one needs in order to understand spiritual reality and to lead a life that is pleasing to God is found in Christ. Also, the grammar forces us to conclude that this treasury is still hidden from those who refuse to see that God’s fullness is revealed in Christ, since He is the sole mediator of the Gospel, God’s final and fullest revelation to men.

The false teachers were claiming to have (through their relationship with a supposed hierarchy of supernatural beings) a higher knowledge than that possessed by ordinary believers. Against this, Paul argued that since all wisdom and knowledge is in Christ, all the knowledge one needs is therefore available to all true believers.

II. Paul’s Warning to the Colossian Saints: (vs.4-5)

Next Paul wrote, “*Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words*” (vs.4). The transition in this verse is more abrupt than it first appears, this is because the English word “*now*” is based on a Greek conjunction that is missing from a number of important manuscripts, and therefore, it is best not to include it. It would seem that Paul did this to catch the attention of his readers and reinforce the point he was about to make. The demonstrative pronoun “*this*” refers back to everything Paul had written since verse three of chapter one. The reference to the potential source of deception as “*anyone*” has a general sense, applying to any individual who might do what is described here. The Greek word translated as “*persuasive words*” refers to something that sounds plausible, but which is actually false. Something that is said using well-constructed, probable arguments, and that tends to sound convincing, but which is nevertheless untrue. Paul was warning these saints that they needed to see beyond the persuasive words of the heretics to the empty and damning conclusions they were affirming. The situation Paul writes about here was not unique to Christianity. Secular teachers and philosophers of the time often criticized professional public speakers for their unethical use of persuasion at all costs, ignoring truth in their efforts to persuade. Many educated people in antiquity were trained and skilled in persuasive speech. Some used this training to manipulate other people. The warning here is that often false ideas can be communicated in persuasive ways, therefore, protecting oneself from deception requires discernment and a thorough understanding of the truth.

In the final verse of this passage Paul wrote, “*For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ*” (vs.5). The conjunction “*for*” that Paul used here introduced his grounds for the warning that he gave in this verse. When one reads through all of Paul’s letters it seems doubtful that Paul ever used the language of “*spirit*” without some reference to the Holy Spirit. Considering this then, even though the natural understanding of the contrast that Paul makes here between “*flesh*” and “*spirit*” makes it clear that he was making reference to his human spirit, it is likely that he was speaking of his spirit in communion with the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he was expressing that his presence with the Colossians involved more than simply empathetic feelings, he was speaking of the profound corporate sense of identity he had with them that was mediated by the Holy Spirit and based upon their mutual union in Christ.

When Paul wrote about what he rejoiced to see, he was referring to what he hoped to see if he could be physically present with these believers. What he hoped to see was their “*good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ*”. The paired Greek words translated as “*good order*” and “*steadfastness*” were military terms conveying the thought of an enemy breaching a formally solid formation of troops. It means something akin to maintaining a solid front. Through this imagery Paul was presenting his hope that the situation in Colossae was like that of an army under attack but that was holding its ground. It is possible that this optimistic hope was based on a mostly favorable report that Epaphras had presented to Paul when they had met together. Though, even if this is true, it in no way would minimize the dangers that were threatening the church. It merely seems to convey the expectation that on the whole the Colossians had not been moved from their spiritual foundation. These two participles translated as “*good order*” and “*steadfastness*” express one complex act. Also, it is best to take the first pronoun “*your*” as modifying the word “*order*” and the phrase “*of your faith*” as modifying “*steadfastness*”, and taking the conjunction “*and*” as having an epexegetical function. When one does this, the interrelationship between the two parts of the sentence becomes clear, “*rejoicing to see your order that is reflected in the steadfastness of your faith in Christ*”. In this context, the focus is not simply on their order or on the strength of their faith, it is primarily on the anchor of their lives which is Christ, the object of their faith.

Conclusion:

The central concern for Paul in this letter becomes clear in this passage. He was concerned for the spiritual welfare of these saints because some persuasive heretics had entered their fellowship. Paul wanted to reinforce in their minds that all they needed could be found in Christ, and that keeping them focused on Christ was the driving concern of his ministry to them, and it was the goal that motivated him to endure hardship on their behalf.