

What Comforts our Hearts

Text:

Colossians 2:1-5

“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.”

Introduction:

“Struggle” is the link between the present passage and the previous passage. Paul closes the preceding paragraph by saying that because of his call to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, and because of the greatness of the message of God, the revealed mystery, the Gospel that had been committed to him, he toiled, “struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” He now turns his attention directly to the Colossians, the Laodiceans, and all other believers of the Gentile mission, who had not personally encountered him, to tell them that he is struggling on their behalf as well as on the behalf of those with whom he has had personal contact. He even assures them in verse 5 that though he may not be physically present with them, and due to his present imprisonment not capable of making a trip to see them, yet in spirit he is present with them. What Paul means by this is that what we express by the proverb: “out of sight, out of mind”, was not true in their case. Paul’s deep love for Christ expressed itself in the constant love he had for the churches, even the ones he had not been able to visit, and his constant concern for their spiritual well being. During what was most likely the same imprisonment he wrote to the Philippians with whom he had spent time:

“It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 1:7-8).

But even those believers he had never met were the object of his affection and solicitation, but more than this of his efforts which he describes as “struggles”.

At a first reading of the text our first question might be: “How can Paul struggle on behalf of people he has never even seen?” The answer to this question is at least twofold. First, as we have already remarked when we were looking at his intercessory prayer in chapter one, Paul saw prayer as an essential and integral part of his ministry. He also uses this same very strong word “struggle” to describe intercessory prayer. In chapter 4 verse 12 of this same epistle he says of Epaphras, his colleague from Colossae who had labored among them to bring them the Gospel, and who had now brought news to Paul in Prison of their present state of affairs that he was constantly “struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.” So prayer is the first way in which he struggled on behalf of not only the believers to whom he is writing, but all believers. The second way in which he struggled on their behalf was through all of the effort he made in traveling, preaching, teaching, writing, and defending the cause of the Gentile mission. As we saw in the previous study, he had a deep sense of responsibility to fulfill the mission that had been committed to him by Christ to present the Gentile believers “mature in Christ”, and it was to this end that he labored by the power of Christ, in spite of suffering and hardship, on the behalf of all of the churches.

What I especially want to see in this passage are the reasons for Paul’s struggle. Why did he go to such effort, even on the behalf of people he didn’t even know personally? We may begin by dividing his reasons into a negative and a positive reason. They are indicated in the text by the two occurrences of “in order that”.

- Verse 2: “In order that their hearts might be comforted”
- Verse 4: “In order that no one beguile you with enticing words”

We will briefly allude to the negative reason and then focus on the positive reasons. Negatively, he fears for them because of the false teachers that have infiltrated the church, whom he mentions for the first time in verse 4, when he states: “I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.” Just one brief statement, but a statement filled with concern. If, for the moment, they have rejected these “enticing words” or “plausible arguments”, and Paul is able to rejoice because of their good order and the firmness of their faith in Christ, he knows that the very presence of such teachers is a threat to both their order and their faith, and he wants to do all that he can to bolster both in the face of the attack. Paul had learned by experience the havoc that is wreaked by heresy. He had seen it with the teaching of the judaizers in the churches of Galatia, he had seen it with those who had divided the church of Corinth into factions and misled the believers in both faith and conduct. He would not wait until he could journey to Colossae and speak with them in person, he takes up his pen to combat error that would shake their faith, distort their conduct, and destroy their peace of heart.

Let us be warned. It is the true faith of the Gospel, genuine faith in Jesus Christ that brings the hope of salvation, comforts our hearts, unites the church in love, gives order and discipline to our lives, and makes us effective in God’s service. It is out of love, therefore, that all true servants of Christ warn of false prophets and teachers. The rest of chapter two will provide

ample opportunity to look at the nature of this false teaching and why Paul warned against it. Let us now turn to his positive reason: “that our hearts might be comforted.”

By using this expression, Paul is simply expressing his desire for their spiritual well-being. Perhaps the best illustrations of the two words that he employs come from Jesus’ farewell address in John 13-16. Twice in John 14 (verses 1, 27) Jesus says: “Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” In the first instance he adds: “you believe in God, believe also in me.” In the second: “Peace I give unto you, my peace I give: unto you, not as the world gives, give I unto you.” Jesus is telling his disciples on his last night on earth with them that a true relationship with him leads to a settled heart, to peace. This peace is not the result of the absence of difficulty, but it is peace in the midst of difficulty. The world may hate us, but Christ has overcome the world.

The second word, “comforted” comes from the same family of words as the word that Jesus uses in this discourse for the Holy Spirit that he is going to send from heaven as “another comforter”. Indeed in this same chapter he says:

“And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; *Even* the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.” (John 14:14-16).

To have the “heart comforted” is the same as what Paul calls in Philippians 4:7, knowing “the peace of God that passes all understanding.” Now Paul knows that peace, and he knows where it comes from. He knows that we only have it when we are firmly planted in the good soil of the gospel, when we are firmly rooted in Jesus Christ, when we are abiding in the vine. If we listen to the “enticing words” and allow ourselves to be drawn away from Christ and the Gospel, we lose that comfort of heart that only comes from being in a living relationship with its giver. This is the reason that he warns us against all teaching that would lead us away from the truth of the Gospel.

Now in the text he speaks of three things that will keep us in vibrant living relationship with Christ and enable us to maintain peace of heart. It is these three things that we should take away from this text. All are things that require awareness and effort on our part. Let us consider them. They are:

- To have our hearts knit together in love
- To achieve the riches of full assurance of understanding and knowledge of God’s mystery
- To seek all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Jesus Christ

I. Be United in Love

The truth of the gospel unites, it creates love and goodwill. Where the gospel is preached, taught, believe, loved and lived out, people love one another. False teaching divides. It makes us suspicious of one another. One of the marks of deviant teaching is that people are always watching one another to make sure they are not stepping out of line. When we stray from the gospel, we lose the freedom of the gospel. This is the great lesson of Galatians 5 where Paul begins by saying: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 1:1). Then later in the chapter he warns them: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal. 5:13-15). Some of us have had the experience of being in a church where people were “biting and devouring one another”. This is the result of the judgmental spirit that takes over when people forget the gospel of God’s free grace; when they forget that we are justified by God’s grace, because of Christ’s sacrifice; when they quit acting like forgiven sinners, and begin to seek to justify themselves by making a parade of their proper righteousness.

When such a spirit invades our churches we become self-destructive. Such a spirit cannot co-exist with the gospel of Christ. For the gospel teaches us that we are all equally sinners, and all equally saved by the grace of God and the saving work of Jesus Christ. On more than one occasion Paul says there is no place for boasting in who we are or in what we have achieved. For example, he states in chapter 3 that believers have: “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (verse 10). Then, “there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (verse 11). As a result of this we will; “Put on, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful” (verses 12-15).

Notice how in these verses new life in Christ leads to a new understanding of other people, especially of our fellow believers, which in turn leads to treating one another with compassion, humility, meekness, and patience. Notice how a judgmental spirit is replaced by a spirit of forgiveness, and love becomes the bond that holds everything together. When this happens Paul says the peace of Christ or to follow our present text the comfort of Christ will rule in our hearts.

II. Seek Full Assurance

The second thing that the text links to comfort of heart is “full assurance of understanding and knowledge of God’s mystery”. In our last text the term “mystery” occurred twice, and we explained there that for Paul a mystery was not something hidden, but something that God had revealed. We emphasized that it is something that only God can tell us. There are things we can discover no other way. There is truth that can only be known by divine revelation. We also saw that, in our case, that divine revelation is contained in the Scriptures and reaches its fullest luminosity in Jesus Christ. Simply put, for us, assurance comes from knowing that God has spoken to us in Scripture and knowing what he has said.

I stated previously that all of the things that the text speaks of that bring us comfort of heart require intention and effort on our part. This is the case here. We must first desire to know God’s truth then the more effort we make to understand it, the greater the comfort it will bring us. This is the reason Paul prays in Ephesians 1 that:

“The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (verses 17-22).

The Scriptures often link truth and love. Paul says that the ultimate sign of Christian maturity of achieving full-grown stature in Christ is that we learn to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). When our lives are grounded in the truth of God’s revelation, our relationships will be controlled by divine love and we will have assured and comforted hearts.

This is the reason why as a church and as individuals we must give preeminence to the knowledge of the Scriptures. Not that we might become walking Bible encyclopedias, but that we might have assurance before God and man of our right standing with God through Jesus Christ, so that we might know God’s will and do it, so that we might be taught of God and walk in God’s ways and thus experience the comfort and the peace of God.

Leslie Newbigin, one of the great Christian leaders of the 20th century was an atheist during his university day at Oxford. One day he asked a friend, who was a Christian, what he could do to come to faith in God. His friend gave him some very good advice. He told him to get up an hour earlier each day and read the Bible. Newbigin took his advice. He became a believer, a missionary, and a great Christian leader. If you want God’s comfort seek to know his truth as it is revealed in his word. If you have to do like Newbigin did, get up an hour earlier, but find time each day for the Scriptures. It is a dreary day when we receive nothing from God, but what

assurance comes from those times when the divine comforter teaches us as we read, study and meditate upon the inspired writings.

III. Cling to Christ

The final advice Paul has for us in order that we might maintain our order, and our firm faith in Christ; if we would have assured hearts and know God's Peace is to cling to Christ. Verse 3: "in whom are hid all the treasures and wisdom of God", is the verse we have taken as a theme as we make our way through this letter. On almost every line, Paul is in some way saying: "Look to Christ". To those with a Jewish bent in Colossae, he will say: "Don't look back to the old." These things, he says: "are a shadow of things to come, but the reality is Christ." To those who still feared the old elemental spirits, and continued to live their lives in superstitious fear he says: Christ by his cross has "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (2:15). To all of us he says: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (3:1-15).

"Christ is all you need" may sound like a worn out cliché, but the Apostle would give it his whole-hearted approval, as would all those who have sought and found all of God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge.