

This morning we thought about not being afraid because God is with us. I think that one of the ways that that works itself out in our lives is that we can think of other things besides the pandemic. That is not to say that it is wrong to think about the pandemic and what it means to respond to it in a godly way. It is rather hard not to think about it a lot since because of it we are more or less confined to our homes. But certainly, one of the results of not fearing in a Christian way will be that we will have the mental space for thinking about the gospel and the Christian life and the kingdom of God in a more general way.

I don't know about you, but I find it welcome to at least move in the direction of normal in areas where we are able to do that. And so, we will continue our study of the letter to the Colossians as part of our need to simply feed on the word of God. One of the central convictions of biblical Christianity is that the primary means that God uses for our spiritual growth is God's word and because we believe that all of God's word is profitable, it is important that we work our way through books of the Bible.

So, this evening our passage is Colossians 1:24-29. In this passage Paul speaks about his role as a missionary. This purpose here is to emphasize that the gospel that he preached was the true gospel from God and as is often the case when it does that, he is countering false teachers in the churches. In the second half of chapter 2 he will deal with their teaching directly, but before he gets to that he makes the point that the gospel that he preached is the true gospel that had been revealed to him by God.

Remember how in the paragraph that we looked at last week, Paul had spoken of the urgency of "not shifting from the hope of the gospel that [they had] heard." In the paragraph we will consider this evening Paul is speaking about his own role in the plan of God for the proclamation of that gospel and along the way, he makes wonderfully rich comments about how wonderful that gospel is.

And this is relevant to you because being a Christian means caring about God's mission in the world. It means loving to think about how wonderful the gospel is, and it means caring about how that gospel is to work itself out in our lives.

Now in verse 24 we have a very striking and almost shocking statement. Paul writes, "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...." The Bible has an awful lot to say about suffering and there are many different perspectives. That is very important for us because suffering in one way or another is a part of life and as Christians it is part of the Christian life. But here Paul is not talking about suffering in general, nor is he talking about the suffering for the sake of the gospel that is common to all Christians, he is talking about his own sufferings for the sake of the Colossians and for the church in general.

There are other passages that speak about sufferings that in one way or another are part of every Christian's life, but that is not what Paul is talking about here. "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." Clearly, he is

speaking about his own sufferings as a missionary. Paul was in prison for the sake of Christ when he wrote this and there is a lot in the book of Acts and in the rest of Paul's letters about the many different ways that Paul suffered that was directly related to his work as a missionary.

One of the things that this teaches us is that some of God's people are called to suffer in ways that others are not. Paul was a missionary. He traveled all around the ancient world proclaiming the gospel. And as one who was more prominent, he attracted persecution in a way that others did not. That is not to say that suffering in some way for the sake of the gospel is not just part of the Christian life. It is. But quite clearly here Paul as a prominent missionary was suffering in a way that most others in the church were not.

And we see this in that also today when there is persecution, it is the leaders of the church that often bear the brunt of the persecution. Again, that is not to say that other church members do not suffer, they clearly do, but still when you get the reports of people who are killed or imprisoned, very often the stories are about ministers. This is just to say that not every Christian is called to suffer in the same way and what Paul is talking about in this passage is his suffering for the sake of the church. He suffered in order to bring the word of God to build the church.

Now he says something very striking about the significance of his suffering for the church. "[I]n my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions...." It is quite striking that Paul speaks of Christ's afflictions as somehow lacking. Paul does not mean that Christ's suffering for our salvation was lacking and that his suffering somehow makes up for that. That would contradict everything else Paul wrote about the sufficiency of Christ's suffering for our salvation.

What Paul means here is that Jesus has ordained that the process of proclaiming the gospel to the world would involve suffering on the part of the church. Jesus obtained salvation through his suffering and he has ordained that the process of bringing the message of what he has achieved to the world would also involve suffering. It is in that sense that Paul writes of "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Christ's sufferings perfectly fulfilled the purpose of saving his people from their sins. But in the plan of God more suffering was necessary in order to get the message out to the world and that was the sufferings of the people of God in bringing the message to the world. And Paul himself played a unique role in that as the one who was the leading missionary to the Gentiles in the early church.

But Paul here is speaking about his own suffering and not the suffering of the Colossians. And he is doing that in context in which he is urging the Colossians not to shift from the hope of the gospel that they had heard. So the purpose of Paul referring to his own sufferings for them is to convince them that they should stick to the gospel that he preached and not be influenced by false teachers. And in particular his reference to his own sufferings made it clear that Paul was not in this for himself. He was willing to suffer for their sake. He was so passionate about his gospel and how important it was for people to hear it that he was willing to suffer in order that the church might hear that good news and be built up by it.

And so, the application for us is the same as it was for the Colossians. If Paul was willing to suffer and even to rejoice in his suffering in order to benefit the church, we should value that gospel very highly and understand that that message is vital for our wellbeing. We should not be swayed by false teaching, but stick to the biblical teaching and we should see in Paul's willingness to suffer for the sake of the church how important it is to hear and embrace Paul's message – the biblical message and not some other. This passage is really all about underscoring how important the biblical gospel message is.

Verse 25 continues this theme by emphasizing that Paul had been called by God to bring the message. Paul says there that he “became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.” So, to emphasize how important it was for the Colossians to stick to his message and respond to it, Paul is reminding them that his message ultimately came from God.

Paul says that he has been made a servant of the church. That is the meaning of the word “minister” here. That ministry was a stewardship from God. The idea of stewardship has to do with being entrusted with a responsibility given to him from God. We are used to thinking about the idea of stewardship in connection with how we use our money and our gifts. They are given to us to be used and managed for the glory of God. Here Paul is emphasizing that he has been given the task of serving the church as a stewardship assigned to him from God. It was for them – for the Colossians – for the church. And the task that he had been given by God for the church was to “make the word of God fully known.”

Again, the point that Paul is making has to do with the importance of his teaching – the importance of the word of God. He is saying that the message that he is communicating to them in this letter is a message that comes from God himself. Paul made the same point to the Thessalonian church when he wrote in 1 Thessalonians 2:13, “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

So, Paul in our text is underscoring the importance of his message emphasizing that it was the word of God. And his purpose in this context is to urge the Colossians to receive his message as the word of God which God has given for them. It was so important for their wellbeing that Paul was happy to be suffering in order to get that word to them.

He also stresses here the importance of them hearing and believing and obeying the whole word of God. He says here that the stewardship that God had given him for them was to make the word of God fully known. Paul is passionate about the Colossians knowing the message of the word of God fully. He clearly does not believe that a simple summary of the gospel message is enough for the health and wellbeing of the church. In the nature of the case it is necessary to begin with a summary of the gospel in evangelism, but what Paul is emphasizing here is that for the members of the church to grow as Christians they need the whole word of God.

Paul emphasizes this same point in his farewell speech to the elders of Ephesian church that is recorded in Acts 20. In Acts 20:27 he says, “[F]or I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.” And in his emphasizing the importance of teaching and thus learning the whole word of God, Paul is reflecting Jesus who, when he gave the great commission, instructed the church to make disciples by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20).

The application of this point for us is that it is very important for us to take seriously the process of increasing in our knowledge of the word of God. In this letter Paul is teaching the Colossians the word of God more fully and in this passage, he is seeking to convince them how important it is for them to learn and embrace what he is teaching them.

This is why in preaching we seek to cover as much of the Bible as possible and to preach and teach every subject and every theme. This is why we seek to go beyond the basics in preaching and teaching. And the implication for all believers is that we should be eager about growing in our knowledge of God’s word. As Peter puts it in 1 Peter 2:2, “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation....” This is why the author of the letter to the Hebrews rebukes the members of the Hebrew church for their lack of growth in understanding the message. He writes in Hebrews 5:11, “For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.” He is clearly not pleased about that.

God is teaching us here the importance of growing in the knowledge of his word for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. It is not the only important thing in the Christian life. It is possible to be very knowledgeable in the word of God and very weak in putting into practice, but there can be no question that one of the great emphases of Scripture is the importance of growing in our knowledge of God’s word for spiritual growth. And that is really what our text is all about.

In the next two verses, Paul continues emphasize the importance of his teaching by emphasizing how precious and significant the gospel message is. In verse 26 he speaks of it as “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.” He is saying here that this message is something incredibly special. It is a message that has been hidden for ages and generations, but which now has been revealed. Paul use of the idea of mystery does not refer to something that is mysterious, but rather something that has been hidden and that now has been revealed.

If we look at the story line of the Bible, it is clear that God has revealed himself and his purposes of salvation and judgment gradually in history. It is also clear that the coming of Jesus, his teaching, his life, death and resurrection and the apostolic explanation of the significance of Jesus represents a great burst of revelation about both salvation and judgment. The NT makes it very clear that Jesus and all that he accomplished represented a great turning point in history and that the message that is rooted in him is the most glorious

message imaginable. And Paul is reflecting and contributing to that theme here in these verses. The message that he was preaching is “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.”

In verse 27 Paul continues to emphasize the glory of this message. “To them [that is to the saints] 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.”

This is something incredibly wonderful, Paul is saying. Paul is characterizing the incredible significance of the message that he was proclaiming throughout the world. The idea of the mystery being revealed through Paul’s teaching has a lot to do with the gospel coming to the Gentiles. Very often when Paul discusses the idea of the mystery of the good news in Jesus being revealed - an important part of the message that has been hidden but now is revealed is the fact that God’s plan of salvation includes the Gentiles which is another way of saying that it is for the whole world.

That is something that was new for the Jews and it took them a while to wrap their heads around that and some never did. From the time of Abraham until Pentecost the Jews were the people of God. In his long-term plan God had all the world in mind, but for a very long period of time his focus was on the Jews. And so, the fact that the Gentiles were to be included among the people of God, not by becoming Jews, but through faith in Jesus Christ – that was an unspeakably significant development in God’s plan of salvation.

And Paul is very excited about that. That is why he was so zealous to bring the gospel to the Gentiles – he understood what a great blessing this was. He understood that this was the best possible news. Through his message, which centered on Jesus, God was calling people from all nations to himself. God was proclaiming to the whole world the good news of salvation in Jesus. The preaching of Jesus to the Gentiles is about the preaching of Jesus to the whole world.

And that message is the most glorious message imaginable. This mystery, long hidden, but now revealed, is the proclamation of salvation in Jesus for the whole world. Listen again to how Paul speaks of it. “To them [to the saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery.” And what is that glorious mystery? “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

The glorious message that Paul is proclaiming is “Christ in you.” Believers in Jesus have Christ in them. Paul gives a little longer expression of this idea in Galatians 2:20, when he says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” So,, when Paul speaks about Christ in me as something that is wonderful and glorious, he is speaking about a whole new way of living life. He is speaking about Christ living in us enabling us to live the new life that he came to bring.

Paul is very excited about that. This is not some abstract doctrine for him. This is a whole new life. This is about Jesus living in his people and enabling them to live in a whole new way.

You know a huge part of the biblical message is about how to live life. The biblical message is consistently that living a life of sin is sub-human – it is a form of death and it leads to death. It is a life of hopelessness. It is a life of superficial pleasure which is missing the greatest possible joy and satisfaction which is life with God and for God. That is what Jesus came to bring for people from all the nations. And that is what is represented by the term “Christ in you.” When Christ is in you, he is animating you. He is changing you to live life as it was meant to be lived. Paul is very excited about proclaiming that message. It was so wonderful and so glorious that he was willing to do whatever it took to proclaim that message to as many people as possible and to expound that message to the churches.

He goes on to elaborate on the meaning of Christ in you with the phrase “hope of glory.” So, living with Christ in you is a life of hope and the hope is for glory. This is the opposite of living apart from Christ. To live without Christ is a life of death leading to death. It is a dead end. It is a life of hopelessness. But if Christ is in you, you have hope. You are heading for glory.

This idea of Christians being glorified is an interesting one. It almost seems wrong to want glory. Life is about giving glory to God. But what we need to understand that living for the glory of God is glorious. There is a wrong way of seeking our own glory, but there is also a right way and the right way is to be passionate about God’s glory. But if we are passionate about God’s glory, (and that is what happens when Christ is in us), that in itself is glorious. God created us as human beings to be glorious – to have glory and honor through putting God first and living for him. Psalm 8:5 says of humanity, “[Y]ou have made him ... and crowned him with glory and honor.” To the degree that we become what we are created and saved to be – to that degree we are glorious. And the essence of that glory is that we seek the glory of God first of all.

And that is what Paul is after for the Colossians. Verse 28 says, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Verse 29, “For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.” This last verse helps us to understand what “Christ in me” means. It means that Christ is powerfully working within us with his energy and the result is that we toil and struggle to live the life that Christ calls us to live.

That life here is described as “mature in Christ.” That is what Paul is seeking for the Colossians and his way of nurturing that is through warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom. To be mature in Christ involves fighting against sin. Warnings are for correction. Warnings are about the danger of sin. Paul’s ministry of the word of God included warning against sin as is very obvious from his letters. To turn from sin is to turn towards maturity in Christ.

And teaching as an important role to play as well. When we think of Paul’s teaching or more generally biblical teaching, besides warning we have instruction on the kind of life that is pleasing to God, but we also have all the wonderful truth about God and the gospel – about Jesus and salvation – that motivates us to strive for maturity in Christ.

So much of Paul's teaching is about motivation because it is about the glory of God and the wonder of his salvation. If we think of about Paul's teaching besides warning, it was about the truth of what God in Christ has done, and is doing, to reveal his glory in the salvation of sinners. In the teaching of the Bible, about God and about salvation, we have encouragement – we have motivation to want to grow to be more like Christ.

And this is so much the purpose of the biblical teaching. There is warning of the dangers and the emptiness of life apart from God. And those are plentiful and serious and must be taken seriously. But then there is so much teaching that is not warning, but the glory of God, the wonderful news of salvation in Christ through faith and instruction concerning about how to grow toward maturity in Christ.

And this passage is part of that. If there is anything that stands out in this passage it is Paul's great excitement and passion for the gospel. He was passionate about the glory of Christ, but he was also passionate about how great a blessing it is to embrace the gospel and then to live the life of growing to maturity in Christ. He was willing to suffer in order to bring that gospel to the world and to the church to build up the people of God. He could even rejoice in his sufferings, not because he enjoyed suffering, but because he understood the significance of his suffering.

In these verses Paul conveys to us a sense of great enthusiasm for the gospel and for the blessed life that gospel is intended to produce. And that is surely a great part of the way that we are motivated to share that enthusiasm ourselves and feed on these truths as a means of growing towards that maturity in Christ that Paul was so anxious to see in the Colossians.