

PREFACE

At this point in our study of Colossians we are reminded that while the *text* of God's word was written by the Holy Spirit, its *structure*, its divisions, are man-made—that the chapter and verse breaks have been inserted for ease of use: indexing the Bible to make it easier to find what we are looking for. There is no *thematic* break at the chapter break. The apostle Paul is still on the same topic with which he closed Chapter One: his work on behalf of the church. Let's begin at v28 in Chapter One.

Read Colossians 1:28-2:3.

v1: THE STRUGGLE

Chapter One closes with Paul writing, "For this purpose..." For what purpose? To "present every man complete in Christ." To this end Paul "strives." This work may be powered by Christ, as v29 tells us, but that does not mean that Paul is lounging around eating bon-bons. The work is Christ's, but He is doing it *through* the flesh of the apostle. So the striving, the struggling is very real. And Paul chooses words that express this. In v29 it is the verb:

striving = *agonizomai* = from <G73> (agon); **to struggle**, literally (**to compete for a prize**), figuratively (to contend with an adversary), or genitive (to endeavor to accomplish something) :- fight, **labor fervently**, strive; **intense exertion**.

In v2:1 it is the noun:

struggle^{nasb,esv}, **conflict**^{kjvs} = *agona* = from <G71> (ago); properly a place of assembly (as if led), i.e. (by implication) **a contest** (held there); figurative an effort or anxiety :- conflict, contention, **fight**, race; strenuous activity. [As with so many words, *agon* originally stood for the *place* of an assembly for contest, then eventually was used for the contest that took place there.]

There is a different Greek word that he would have used to express the formal clash of great armies (*polemos*); this word is more personal, used of an athletic contest or fight. *Vine's* calls it "a contest against spiritual foes, as well as human adversaries."

Turn please to the gospel of Luke.

Read Luke 22:39-44.

The attitude of prayer in the first century was standing. But Jesus was in such agony of soul that Matthew and Mark tell us that He fell to the ground on His face. His agony was so intense, so deep, that it required an angel to come and strengthen Him—to keep Him going. His sweat was so profuse it seemed to have the consistency and appearance of thick blood pouring from His head. Jesus was in "agonia."

agony = *agonia* = from <G73> (agon); a struggle (properly the state), i.e. (figurative) **anguish** :- agony.

Out of all the words the apostle Paul could have chosen to describe his work on behalf of the Colossians, the Laodiceans and others—striving (v29), struggling (v2:1)—he chose the same one used to describe the horrific agony through which the Lord passed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Like the scene in the Garden, Paul seems to be referring to his prayers—his intercessory prayers on behalf of the young churches. Remember, at the time he was in house arrest, chained to a Roman soldier at all times. He was not out traveling, preaching, or even making tents. His days were numbered, and virtually all his efforts on behalf of the churches consisted of writing letters of counsel—and praying for them.

He cared so deeply, so intensely for even those he had never met, that he describes his prayer time as “agony.”

Sidebar: When we seek to personalize this, a question rises: ***How much do we care?*** By this I don’t mean to suggest that every Christian should be invested 101% in absolutely every endeavor involving faith.

Not everyone can be a missionary in Africa.

Not everyone can stand on a street corner in Times Square.

Not everyone can attend seminary.

But what if God has *called* us to one of these or something else.

What if God has called us to work in support of missionaries.

What if God has called us to work in prayer or financially for those who speak boldly in His name.

What if God has called us to teach or be a spiritual guide for youth in the church.

Are we struggling, fighting, sweating over the task assigned us? Or are we just phoning it in? When we pray for others is it just a perfunctory laundry-list of concerns, or do we *labor*, do we *agonize* over their situations and needs?

One more note: To some it may seem like Paul is bragging here. *Look how hard I pray for you; aren’t you impressed?* But that’s not it at all. How do *you* feel when someone tells you they have been praying for you? Are you not encouraged? Does this not help sustain you through the hardest times, knowing that a brother or sister is joining with you in that struggle?

v2: THE PRAYER

In v2 Paul describes the content of his many fervent prayers. In v28 of the previous chapter he states that his overriding purpose is to “present every man complete in Christ.” And here, to that end, he lists some of what he means by that completeness. This, however, is not a simple bullet-list of discreet items, but a description of how one flows from and into others.

that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love,

encouraged = *parakaleo* = from <G3844> (para) and <G2564> (kaleo); **to call near**, i.e. invite, invoke (by imploration, hortation or consolation) : - beseech, call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), entreat, pray.

In the Christian community the word “encouraged” has become commonplace, and, out of sheer repetition, has lost much of its true depth. This is a powerful and unique aspect of the body. Members of other groups can certainly encourage each other; Christians are not alone in their support and help for each other. What makes it unique in the church is that when *we* encourage each other—come alongside to comfort, exhort, help—we do it in the name of Christ Jesus. In that moment we become *His* heart, *His* hands and feet, *His* arm helping hold up a brother or sister. This encourages *hearts*.

And Douglas J. Moo points out how we must adjust our understanding of the word “heart” (kardia).

The strong tendency in modern English is to use heart with reference to the emotions, whereas in Scripture “heart” designates the center of the personality, the source of willing and thinking in addition to feeling. “Encouraged in heart” or “to have hearts encouraged” is therefore a way of referring to an encouragement that touches the deepest part of our being and that affects every aspect of our persons.

How and why is this done? Because we are “knit together in love” (the NIV “united” is too soft, too shallow).

knit together = *syμβιβazo* = from <G4862> (sun) and *bibazo* (to force; causative [by reduplication] of the base of <G939> (basis)); to drive together, i.e. unite (in association or affection), (mentally) to infer, show, teach :- compact, assuredly gather, intrust, knit together, prove. [in 2:2 a passive form, hence “*knit together*” rather than “*drive together*”]

Paul uses this same word in v19, in the context of speaking more directly to the situation in Colossae.

Read Colossians 2:18-19.

This is the picture of the working, thriving body of Christ, in which each member is supported, encouraged by the others in *agape* love. And let us not pass lightly over this mention of love; we’ll come back to it in just a moment.

and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself,

Since he began this letter Paul has been contrasting the (for lack of a better word) *intellectualized* knowledge and understanding of the heretical Gnostics harassing the Colossians, with the (again, for lack of a better word) *spiritualized* knowledge and understanding in Christ.

v1:5—you previously heard in **the word of truth, the gospel**

v1:6—understood the grace of God **in truth**

v1:9—you may be filled with **the knowledge** of His will in all **spiritual wisdom and understanding**,

v1:26—the **mystery** which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints

v1:27—to whom God willed to **make known** what is the riches of the glory of this **mystery**

v1:28—admonishing every man and **teaching** every man **with all wisdom**

And although Paul is not yet ready to leave this critical topic, he seems to wrap it all up in a gushing summation at the beginning of Chapter Two:

v2:2-3—the full assurance of **understanding**, resulting in a **true knowledge** of **God's mystery**, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden **all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge**.

So from the beginning, Paul has been peppering his counsel with Gnostic terms used in the context of the gospel of Christ. But let's back up and look at what he is saying here in v2.

For the believers in all the churches that receive his counsel, Paul's earnest prayer is that their faith would not be thin and fragile, vacillating. As he wrote in v23 in the previous chapter, his prayer is that they will
continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard,

Look at how he expresses it here in vv2-3. First it is **authentic and complete**:

and attaining to **all** the wealth that comes from the **full assurance** of **understanding**, resulting in a **true knowledge** of **God's mystery**, that is, **Christ Himself**, in whom are hidden **all** the treasures of **wisdom** and **knowledge**.

Second, he wants them to have a solid **confidence** about it. Their faith would become such a solid conviction that it could not be buffeted and knocked off-course by every passing philosophy. Their faith could and would still be challenged, but they would be so assured of it, so confident in it, that nothing could pull them away.

Then, third, he employs some of the **same words** they have been hearing from the Gnostics in describing what he wants them to have:

understanding = *synesis* = from <G4920> (sunieimi); **a mental putting together**, i.e. **intelligence** or (concretely) the intellect :- knowledge, understanding.

true knowledge = *epignosis* = from <G1921> (epiginosko); recognition, i.e. (by implication) **full discernment**, acknowledgment :- (ac-) knowledge (-ing, -ment).

mystery = *mysterion* = from a derivative of muo (**to shut the mouth**); **a secret** or "mystery" (through the idea of silence imposed by initiation into religious rites) :- mystery.

wisdom = *sophia*.

knowledge = *gnosis*.

But, fourth, here's the critical **difference** that changes the very nature of all these words and ideas used by the Gnostics: All this knowledge and wisdom and understanding Paul speaks of is based in "God's mystery, that is Christ Himself."

Sidebar: The KJVs end v2 differently, with "both of the Father and of Christ." This translation is based on their use of a different original manuscript. Douglas J. Moo tells us that "the Greek text underlying the last four words in this phrase are very confused, with a tangled web of textual variants ['no less than fifteen'] facing the interpreter. But most scholars concur that the reading assumed by [the NIV, NASB, ESV and most others] is the correct one." This interpretation agrees nicely with what Paul wrote in 1:27, assigning the "mystery" to Christ.

Read Colossians 1:27.

Christ Jesus Himself is the one in whom is hidden *all* wisdom and knowledge.

hidden = *apokryphos* = from <G613> (apokrupto); secret; by implication treasured :- hid, kept secret.

treasures = *thesauros* = from <G5087> (tithemi); **a deposit**, i.e. **wealth** (literal or figurative) :- treasure. [we get the word "thesaurus"—a treasury of words—from this Greek word]

wisdom = *sophia*; **knowledge** = *gnosis*.

All wisdom and knowledge that surpasses anything imagined by this fallen world (because it is kept secret in Christ) is attainable, knowable *in Christ*. But when we consider this passage as a whole, we see that the whole process begins not just in Christ, but in Christ's *body*—the church! Notice how Paul begins this passage:

...that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love...

R. Kent Hughes: F. F. Bruce comments: "Paul emphasizes that the revelation of God cannot be properly known apart from the cultivation of brotherly love within the Christian community."

This means that mere intellectual comprehension of the mystery of Christ will not bring full understanding of the mystery, for understanding also comes through the love of Christians one for another. How is this so? When we are loved by other believers, we experience Christ through them, and thus our knowledge of Christ is enhanced. The complementary side of this is that when we allow the Holy Spirit through us to live the life of Christ (and we experience this when we do acts of love toward members of the Body of Christ), then too we have our knowledge of him enhanced.

This is an important message for an alive Christianity. No intellectual process will lead to a full grasp of the mystery of Christ unless it is accompanied by a love for him and for Christians that knits us, the Church, together in love. We cannot pursue knowledge of God in willful, unloving isolation, rejecting fellowship with others.

The deepest knowledge of the mystery of Christ comes from both the head and the heart. We must study the Scriptures about him intensely, with all our heart, and we must love him and his people with all our heart—and then we will know as we ought. So when brotherly love is present and continuing, it facilitates a profound knowledge of Christ, which in turn results in wisdom and knowledge.