

Colossians 1:21+

1. In 1:22-23, the Colossians are told they were reconciled by Christ's death, in order that they be presented "holy and blameless and irreproachable—provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard".
 - a) For the moment thinking only of these two verses, what is the condition ("provided") and what is the desired result should this condition be satisfied?¹
 - b) Paul is writing to warn the Colossians that, "no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit" (2:8). From (a), then, what exactly is Paul instructing them to do, and what will happen if they don't?
 - c) Can you think of someone you know who has not continued in an established and firm faith but has instead moved away from the hope held out in the gospel. Would you say this person is alienated from God or holy in His sight? Why? (Thanks to Ed for this one!)
 - d) Calvin writes of this passage,

Here we have an exhortation to perseverance, by which he admonishes them that all the grace that had been conferred upon them hitherto **would be vain, unless they persevered in the purity of the gospel**. And thus he intimates, that they are still only making progress, and have not yet reached the goal. For the stability of their faith was at that time exposed to danger through the stratagems of the false apostles. Now he paints in lively colors assurance of faith when he bids the Colossians be grounded and settled in it. **For faith is not like mere opinion, which is shaken by various movements, but has a firm steadfastness, which can withstand all the machinations of hell**. Hence the whole system of Popish theology will never afford even the slightest taste of true faith, which holds it as a settled point, that we must always be in doubt respecting the present state of grace, as well as respecting final perseverance.

Calvin warns they must "persevere in the purity of the gospel." Yet he focuses on the stability of faith, in contrast with mere opinion. What "Popish" false teaching is Calvin contradicting? How does it differ from the danger Paul is warning against?

2. In one of Scripture's more obscure passages, Paul says "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing *what is lacking in Christ's afflictions* for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (1:27). What does Paul mean? We know it can't refer to Jesus'

¹ The NIV's "if you continue" is a more literal reading than the NRSV's "provided that you continue," though the latter is probably preferred because the "if" (*ei ge*) here carries confidence with it, so that a good paraphrase would be "At any rate if you stand firm in the faith—and I am sure that you will" (O'Brien, 69). This doesn't remove the question of human agency, but the tenor of the exhortation isn't "you are hanging by a thread."

atoning suffering, since Paul makes it clear Christ's sacrifice is exhaustive, covering all our sins (2:13-14; 1:12-14).² But then what deficit of "afflictions" is Paul talking about?

Commentators have considered various ways of understanding this statement. Perhaps the most illuminating notes that in Jewish apocalyptic thinking, God, in his mercy, prescribed a finite amount of affliction to be suffered by his Messiah and Israel prior to the age to come (the "messianic woes"). This idea is also found in Jesus' teaching:

For in those days there will be suffering, such as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, no, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days. (Mk 13:19-20)

The idea that God cuts short the suffering³ of his people has implications: "As God had set a definite measure in time (cf. Gal 4:4) and the limit of the tribulations at the end (Mk 13:4-27) so there is a definite measure of suffering that is to be filled up" (O'Brien, 80).

- a. If we assume Paul has this idea of a finite amount of suffering to be endured—a fixed distance the church must travel to reach its goal—in mind, then what do you think Paul is saying? What is the nature of Paul's suffering and how is it "for the sake of his body, which is the church"?
- b. Wright writes,

...all Christians will suffer for their faith in one way or another: if not outwardly, then inwardly, through the long, slow battle with temptation or sickness, the agonizing anxieties of Christian responsibilities for a family or a church..., the constant doubts and uncertainties which accompany the obedience of faith, and 'the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to', taken up as they are within the call to follow Christ. All these, properly understood, are things to rejoice in—not casually, flippantly or superficially, but because they are signs that the present age is passing away, that the people of Jesus, the Messiah, are the children of the new age, and that the birthpangs of this new age are being worked out in them. (90)

How might it change your view of your sufferings, small or large, to think of them as part of the pre-ordained suffering marked out for the Church until God's kingdom is fully realized?

3. Paul has been commissioned to deliver to the pagans the "word of God" (*logos*), which he refers to as a "mystery" (*mysterion*), hidden through the ages but now revealed to the saints (1:26).

² It's also been pointed out that "nowhere else in the NT is the phrase 'Christ's affliction' used of his redemptive act or general experience of suffering. Instead, Paul uses the concepts 'blood,' 'cross' and 'death' to refer to that act of redemption" (O'Brien, 77).

³ Discipleship necessarily entails suffering; Acts 14:22, 1 Thess 3:3, 7.

Since he will shortly be comparing this “mystery” to the “plausible arguments” (2:4) based on “human tradition” (2:8), it is worth fleshing out what Paul is referring to.

- a. In addition to 1:25-2:3, Paul describes the mystery in the following passages:
 - Eph 1:8b-10: “With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, **as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.**”
 - Eph 3:5-6: “In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, **the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.**”
 - 1 Cor 2:1-2: “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except **Jesus Christ, and him crucified.**”

A *mysterion* was a “secret, secret rite, secret teaching, mystery” (BDAG). The word was used to refer to the secret knowledge available only to initiates of mystery religions and Gnostics. It was also used to translate the Aramaic *raz* (“secret”) which is found several times in Daniel, as in 2:18-19 where it refers to the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream. By contrast, what is the “mystery” of the Gospel?

- b. The mystery is “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden” (1 Cor 2:7), and cannot be comprehended by those with an unspiritual outlook: “Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God’s Spirit, for they are foolishness to them...” (1 Cor 2:13). Furthermore, Paul goes so far as to say that God actively *hid* the mystery of the gospel. Based on 1 Cor 2:7-8 and Eph 3:10, why did God hide the gospel?⁴
 - c. Merriam-Webster defines a mystery as “a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand” and “something not understood or beyond understanding: enigma.” Is the gospel, then, a mystery as well as a *mysterion*?
4. In 2:4 -23, we come to the primary motivation of the letter, the refutation of a particular flavor of false teaching or influence being pressed upon the young Colossian church. Scholars have long debated the nature and source of this teaching. What clues do you find in 2:4-18? Is this a false *teaching*, or *practice*, or both? Are its proponents Jewish or pagan? What is the goal of their teaching or practice—what problem are they trying to solve?
 5. Paul refers to this as a philosophy “based on the principles of this world” (2:8). In what way does this false teaching represent the thinking of the “world”?

⁴ Cf. also 1 Pet 2:10-11.

6. Immediately after warning against captivity by empty philosophy (2:8), Paul makes one of the strongest statements of Jesus' divinity in all of Scripture (2:9).
 - a. Why? What does this have to do with Jewish asceticism? How does it meet the goals of the Jewish asceticism, or free the Colossians from their demands?
 - b. Is there any significance to the fullness of the Deity (and not merely divinity) dwelling in *bodily form*? Is this just another way of saying Jesus is the image of God?
7. Walsh and Keesmaat have paraphrased Colossians 2, drawing a connection between the powers and sovereignties of first-century Rome with the economic, cultural and imperial power structures of the modern West.

And don't get sucked into consumerist ideology when it comes dressed up in the clothes of Christian faith. A "new manly piety" just might be more of the same old patriarchal power-grabbing, capitalist legitimating stuff that we have seen being pimped both at the mall and in the consumer-friendly church. And all the charismatic enthusiasm in the world, rolling the aisles with holy joy, amount to little more than puffed-up humanism if it is devoid of radical transformation of entire human lives. So much religious renewal seems so attractive, so comfortable, so safe. But it is fundamentally secular. Its cultural imagination remains in captivity to an idolatrous worldview, and it has lost contact with the real source of life. It cannot sustain deep and radical growth that is subversive of the regimes of truth because it is not nourished from the source of all things—it does not grow with a growth that comes from God.

If with Christ you died in your baptism to the principles of autonomous consumerism that still hold the world captive, then why do you live in a way that suggests that you are still in the iron grip of its ideological vision? Why do you submit yourself to its regulations to consume as if there were no tomorrow, to live as if community were an impediment to personal fulfillment, to live as if everything were disposable, including relationships, the unborn and the environment? Why do you allow this deceitful vision to still have a hold on you? Don't you know that copulating with the idols of this culture is like climbing into bed with a corpse that is already decomposing? (138)

Discuss!

Ω

Fun fact: In 1:28 Paul says he's, "warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom." "Warning" is *nouthetountes*, which "though sometimes understood as meaning simply 'putting into the mind', most likely includes the setting of someone's mind into proper order, with the implication that it has been in some way out of joint" (Wright, 93).