



The Reverend Dr. David V. Silvernail, Jr.
Colossians 2:1-5

September 2, 2013
English Standard Version

"A Supreme Struggle"

The 5th Sermon in a series on the Book of Colossians entitled
"The Supremacy of Christ"

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, ² 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, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ 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."

Heavenly Father, thank You for giving us the Scriptures and making us Your people. You have brought us to a wonderful book that speaks again and again of the beauty, majesty, and supremacy of Christ. And we pray that You would use it for our spiritual nourishment. Each of us comes in our own condition today; some discouraged, needing encouragement, others apathetic, disillusioned, needing correction and strengthening. Work by Your word and by Your Spirit in our hearts. We know that this sword of the spirit pierces even to the joint and to the marrow. It finds those places out in our hearts which even our closest friends cannot penetrate. Open us up before that word and make Your word, O God, an instrument of the grace of salvation. And for this we need Your grace. Give us the desire to learn from You this morning, in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

INTRODUCTION: *We Think We Know What We Don't Know*¹

Ready? Name the author of this famous quote: "Religion is the opium of the people." BZZZZZZZ. Time's up. If you said Karl Marx, you're right! You're also not the average student in Mark Goldblatt's college writing class.

Goldblatt, a writer and professor, gives a test to his freshmen each semester. A recent class was stumped, as usual, by the professor's question. So Goldblatt offered a clue. He said, "The author was German."

One student raised her hand. "Was it Martin Luther?" The class erupted in laughter. But not for the reason you might think. They thought the woman meant Martin Luther King. Goldblatt had to explain to them that Martin Luther King was named after Martin Luther, who was the leader of the Protestant Reformation, and who was, in fact, German. Still, however, a long way from Karl Marx.

Goldblatt laments the fact that many students today are affected by two primary problems: **They don't know what they should know, and they assume they know much more than they actually do know.**

What does this mean for you and me? We need to grow in our knowledge of God and our culture.

If we're going to have meaningful discussion of a subject — historical, scientific, philosophical, biblical — with someone, we must possess knowledge of the important people and ideas associated with the subject. Why?

It's easy for us to be swayed by a philosophy or theory if we don't understand its origin. It's also hard to go deep into a discussion with a person who doesn't believe in Jesus if we have no idea who or what they're talking about.

So where do we begin? We begin with Jesus. He is the One, according to **Colossians 2:3**, "*in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" By the careful study of His Word, we have the filter for our education. With that growing, developing screen in place, we must strive to learn as much as possible while at the same time we're being warned, **Colossians 2:8**, "*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*"

Do you know what you should know?

Which, of course, begs the question ... What should you know?

And there's lots of answers to that question, but if we asked that question, "What should you know?" of the Apostle Paul, how do you think he would answer? Perhaps he would quote from some of his famous letters to the church in Corinth ... **1 Corinthians 1:22-24**, "*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*"

And then jumping down to verse 30, **1 Corinthians 1:30**, "*And because of Him [God the Father] you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.*"

And rolling right into chapter two, **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**, "*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.*"²

¹ The Introduction is adapted from the article "What You Know" by Tom Felton, found in the now defunct email newsletter, Soul Journey, 5/29/03. Mark Goldblatt is the author of the postmodern novel *Sloth*.

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling,⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,⁵ that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

And so it’s pretty clear that what you should know is *Jesus Christ and Him crucified*. And, in fact, according to today’s passage, that’s ...

v. 1-3: WHAT PAUL WANTS²

“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,² 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,³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The Apostle Paul summed up the content of his preaching by naming a person, Jesus Christ. Christ’s saving presence among the Gentiles is the secret formerly hidden but not revealed, as we saw last week at the end of Colossians 1. And now he’s telling them that in Christ ... *“are hidden ALL the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”*

As we just saw, he told the Corinthians that in coming to them he had resolved to preach nothing but *“Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”* And yet, this monotone, repetitive message was adequate to meet all their needs, God’s apparently foolish, weak, cross-centered message is wiser than human wisdom and stronger than human strength.

Paul starts off by saying, verse 1, *“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.”* Why does Paul **struggle** for these people he hasn’t even met? What do they need so desperately? What’s the urgent answer Paul felt compelled to risk his life to make known to them (and to us).

In mentioning his **struggle**, Paul again uses, for the third time, the noun *agon* from which we get our English word *agony*. The word originally was derived from the place where the Greeks assembled for their Olympic games, a place where they agonized in wrestling and footraces, where they fought to win. Paul had been **agonizing**, fighting for the Colossians with everything he had.

What makes this truly remarkable is that he had never once visited them or their neighboring churches. Aside from Epaphras, Philemon, and perhaps a few others he had met in Ephesus, he’d never even seen the Colossians. He had no idea what the people looked like, he knew nothing of their personalities; yet he **agonized** for them. Why?

Why does the Marine go into combat for strangers back home? Why does the air traffic control guy work so hard to land those planes in the right order? Why does the nurse show such compassion for someone she’s never met?

Why? Why is Paul struggling, sweating, risking his life to deliver his message to people he’s never seen, people whose stories he doesn’t know? Because that was his job, given by God. Because they need it. Because, **Acts 9:15**, *“... the Lord said to him, “Go, for he [Paul] is a*

2 The Exposition and Conclusion of the text has adapted material from the Books, *Preaching the Word – Colossians: The Supremacy of Christ* by Dr. R. Kent Hughes, pages 51-57; *The Hope of Glory* by Dr. Sam Storms, pages 143-157; and *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* by Dr. Dennis Johnson, pages 2, 75, 82-87. And the Sermons, “*The Incomparable Christ – Part 8*” by Dr. J. Ligon Duncan, First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS, nd, www.fpcjackson.org; “*Guarding the Garden*” by Matt Chandler, Village Church, Highland Village, TX, 5/9/10, www.thevillagechurch.net; *Colossians 2:1-7* by Rev. David Fairchild, Kaleo Church, San Diego, CA, 6/17/05, www.kaleochurch.com; and “*A Stable Faith*” by Dr. Phil Newton, South Woods Baptist Church, Memphis, TN, 8/29/99, www.southwoodsbc.org.

chosen instrument of Mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.”

But there’s even more, for Paul and the Colossians shared the same relationship with Christ. He was their spiritual father because he had won them through Epaphras. All of these elements contributed to his **agonizing struggle** and perhaps his persecution as well. (After all, he was in prison when writing this letter.) Wherever Paul went, there was conflict: riots in Ephesus, beatings in Philippi, stoning in Lystra, shipwreck at sea, dangers everywhere. Paul bared his heart in **2 Corinthians 1:8**, *“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were **so utterly burdened** beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.”* The words he used here described a beast of burden which had fallen and could not get up because the load was so heavy. This was how Paul felt in Asia — he thought he was going to die.

There was also the **struggle**, the **agony** of his labor in the gospel. As he wrote to the church in Thessalonica, **1 Thessalonians 2:9**, *“For you remember, brothers, **our labor and toil**: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”*

In addition, there was the **struggle**, the **agony**, that came from caring so much how his converts were doing that he said, **2 Corinthians 11:29**, *“Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?”* It hurts to care, and there were nights when Paul tossed and turned as he thought about his converts and empathized with their ups and downs.

But most of all, he wrestled in prayer for them. That is where the real fight was (and is)! In **Colossians 4:12** he wrote about *“Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always **struggling** on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.”* This is where the greatness of his struggle for the Colossian believers lay! Paul agonized in prayer for people he had never met.

And then he tells them why he’s **struggling** ... he tells them what exactly it is that he wants for them, verse 2, *“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.”*

The first two items on our needs list are encouraged hearts and love-saturated unity with other believers. If our hearts are discouraged, if we’re many things instead of one thing together in Christ, then we’re missing out. We’re missing what it means to belong to God, to be in Christ, to be fully Christian.

Paul knows we should be loaded, rich, wealthy, fully funded **in our understanding of Jesus**. If we don’t really know Jesus, **we’re broke**. We’re missing the point. We may believe that He is a piece of our puzzle instead of the picture on the box. He is the final answer. He is the point. All the facts and what to do with them are waiting to be found in Jesus.

Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York once said that in 1970 a Sunday school teacher changed his life with a simple illustration. The teacher said, “Let’s assume the distance between the earth and the sun (92 million miles) was reduced to the thickness of this sheet of paper. If that is the case, then the distance between the earth and the nearest star would be a stack of papers 70 feet high. And the diameter of the galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high.” Then Keller’s teacher added, “The galaxy is just a speck of dust in the universe, yet Jesus holds the universe together by the word of His power.”

Finally, the teacher asked her students, “Now, is this the kind of person you ask into your

life to be your assistant?"

What you think of Christ, your understanding of Him, **is everything**. **If you believe** in Jesus Christ, that He is eternal, without beginning and without end, that He always was continuing; **if you believe** that He's the creator of everything, every cosmic speck across trillions of light-years of trackless space, the creator of the textures and shapes and colors which daily dazzle your eyes; **if you believe** that He is the sustainer of all creation, the force which is presently holding the atoms of your body, your town, this universe together, and that without Him all would dissolve; **if you believe** that He is the mystery, the incarnate reconciler who will one day reconcile the universe and redeem humanity to Himself; **if you believe** that He is the lover of your soul, who loves you with a love unbounded by His eternal and infinite character; then, despite the fact that life will be full of trouble, **nothing much will go wrong**. Your vision of Christ will shape your life and give it life. **What you believe about Christ** makes all the difference in the world now and in eternity.

And yet Paul prays that your "*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 other words, our depth of understanding is **enhanced** when believers' hearts are bound together in love. This means that mere intellectual comprehension of Christ will not bring full understanding, for understanding also comes through the love of Christians one for another. How is this so? When we're loved by other believers, **we experience Christ through them**, and thus our knowledge of Christ is increased.

This is an important message for anyone who wants to be a mature Christian. No intellectual process will, in and of itself, lead to a full grasp of the mystery of Christ unless it is accompanied by a love for Christ and a love for Christians that knits us, the Church, together in love. We cannot pursue knowledge of God in **willful, unloving isolation**, rejecting fellowship with others. "Complete" understanding of Christ comes in loving community. 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 Him as we should.

And that's critical, because in Christ, verse 3, "*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" This was a swing at the false teachers who claimed to have the way to wisdom and knowledge. Paul said there was no other treasury of knowledge, for "***all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge***" are in Christ. Of this truth the great Scottish preacher Alexander Maclaren remarked, "In Christ, as in a great storehouse, lie all the riches of spiritual wisdom, the massive ingots of solid gold which when coined into creeds and doctrines are the wealth of the Church. All which we can know concerning God and man, concerning sin and righteousness and duty, concerning another life, is in Him Who is the home and deep mine where truth is stored. ... The central fact of the universe and the perfect encyclopedia of all moral and spiritual truth is Christ, the Incarnate Word, the Lamb slain, the ascended King."

In short, what Paul wants for you is found in Peter's writings, **2 Peter 3:17-18**, "*You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.*"¹⁸ *But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*"

And Paul has the same concern that Peter did. He's concerned "*that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.*" In fact, here in Colossians, we discover that's ...

v. 4: WHAT PAUL FEARS

“I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.”

This week I read this fascinating account by Matt Chandler of a large evangelical conference that took place a few years ago. Matt is the Pastor of the Village Church in the Dallas area and President of the Acts 29 network, which is a church-planting network.

He writes, “Last year [2009], I was speaking at what is probably the largest conference in the US. There were well over ten thousand people there. I stuck my head in on two speakers before I was going to go on. [This particular speaker] was giving a talk [which] basically revolved around this idea of “Are you a guardian or are you a gardener?”

It became very apparent in his talk that he was saying we are to be gardeners, we are to cultivate the gospel and make those things look beautiful, we are to cultivate and garden well. He said this guardian thing is this outdated, cold, silly idea that you have to stand guard over anything. His point was that we are to be the gardeners instead. We help things grow. Even then the illustration is flawed, because even the gardener weeds out the weeds. In the end, I’m listening and I’m thinking to myself, “Yeah, that’s good. Garden or guard, which one do you want to be? You want to be a gardener. You want to cultivate, you want to help people grow. You don’t want to be the guy who just stands in front of the garden and says, ‘You’re not allowed in. Be careful of this. Watch out for that.’ And then he starts talking about how the gospel is like one of those plants in the garden, how the gospel has to be nurtured and fed.

And near the end of this talk, he says, “Now I wish I could define the gospel for you, but I can’t define the gospel for you. The gospel can only be defined within individual communities.” The second he said it, I snapped out of it and thought, “**That’s why we need guardians.** That’s why somebody has **got to guard the gate**, because of ridiculous stuff like that, where what has easily been defined for thousands of years is now being called into question.” So now this guy is going, “Okay, the double imputation, when Christ takes on our sin and we take on His righteousness, that’s not the gospel. The gospel has to be decided by you and your individual community.” And now there’s relativity being introduced into what historically has not been relative at all. It has always been, “Here’s the truth. Here’s how God has revealed Himself in Scripture.” And now all of a sudden there’s this, “No, you define it how you want to define it and we’ll define it how we want to define it.” **And I was reminded why we need guardians.**”

That’s precisely the problem that was facing the Colossian church. False teachers had come in preaching a different gospel, a “***Jesus Plus Religion.***” And Paul was coming to them, **not as a gardener, BUT AS A GUARDIAN.**

In light of the heresy that was creeping into the Colossians church, Paul stresses the need for the Colossians’ understanding to include “*a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*” At the heart of this understanding they need to have a settled conviction about Christ’s deity and sufficiency. In “***Christ Himself***” the hidden God reveals Himself to mankind. In that sense, He is “***God’s mystery.***” Jesus is the One in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. He alone is sufficient. Because Christ is sufficient, there is no need for the writings of any cult, philosophy, or psychology to supplement the Bible. He is the source of all true spiritual knowledge.

That knowledge is also crucial to assurance because doubts about Christ’s sufficiency bring doubts about His ability to do what he promised. Paul says in verse 4 that the reason for his concern for knowing Christ is “*in order that no one may delude you with plausible*

arguments.” The basic attack of all false systems throughout history has been to deny either Christ’s deity or his humanity. Believers who have a settled conviction about Christ’s deity and sufficiency are able to withstand the onslaughts of false teachers.

Having told us what he wants, and what he fears, Paul goes on to comment on ...

v. 5: WHAT PAUL SEES

“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.”

Paul **sees** that they are standing firm and rejoices with them. Even though he is “*absent in body*” due to his imprisonment in Rome, Paul says that he was with them “*in spirit.*” Their “*good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ*” caused him to rejoice.

When Paul says “*good order*” he’s using a military term which refers to a line of soldiers drawn up for battle. It might be the condition of troops in the field being found in proper order for the battle that lay before them. In the paraphrase translation **The Message**, that reads, “*I am delighted to hear of the careful and orderly ways you conduct your affairs.*” Confirming once and for all that Paul was a Presbyterian. We might paraphrase it, “you are living the way you’re supposed to be living as Christians.” They were giving attention to their spiritual lives and the spiritual disciplines which are necessary for spiritual maintenance.

We might summarize some of these things in the opening greeting Paul gives in Colossians 1:3-8. These believers had a faith anchored in Jesus Christ alone; a vibrant love for their fellow-believers; a lively hope in Christ; fruitfulness in their grasp and application of the Word; consistency in growth; a teachable spirit; and a love orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. **But they had not arrived spiritually!** There was room to increase in faith. And there was certainly concern to maintain their spiritual maturity.

Second, he refers to “*the firmness of your faith in Christ.*” Again, Paul uses a military term which points to “a solid front.” “*Firmness*” refers to the solidity of a formation of soldiers. Taken together, they express Paul’s joy that individually and collectively the Colossians were standing firm against the attacks of false teaching. It pictures a people who were anchored in the truth of Christ and Him crucified. Though they were surrounded by false teachers trying to delude them, their ranks were unbroken. His goal for them is that they remain settled and fortified in their present and true understanding, not yielding to doubt.

We are reminded that passivity does not build faithful churches. The effort on the part of **all the membership** in exercising spiritual disciplines to increase spiritual growth is not a luxury **but a necessity**. Firmness of our faith in Christ is ongoing. I think it’s no accident that Paul uses military terminology at this point. Effective military units don’t just happen. They work hard at their discipline and attitude to be prepared for whatever type of enemy they may face. The church must have this same posture.

With that being the case, we have to ask ...

CONCLUSION: Are You Firm In Your Commitment?

Are you firm in your commitment to the truth that believers are complete in Christ? Are you firmly convinced that Jesus has paid it all? Are you firmly convinced that forgiveness is found in Him and we need look no place else to find forgiveness? Are you firmly convinced that all the spiritual strength and power which you need for the living of the Christian life can be found in Christ and we don’t need to go somewhere else in addition to Christ to find that power?

Are you convinced of that?

Perhaps someone has come to you suggesting that in addition to these scriptures, there

are other ancient texts that will help you in your walk with God. They come to you with a lie from the pit of hell when they come to you with that word, because the all-sufficient Christ has said, “this is My word and it is sufficient for your edification. Look to no place else.” The Prophet Isaiah said, **Isaiah 8:20**, “*To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.*” Essentially he’s telling us, “If they say to look someplace other than to the teaching and to the testimony, the truth is not in them.” Are you convinced that these Scriptures are sufficient for your edification, for your strengthening, for growing in faith? They are Christ's word to you.

Perhaps someone has come to you and said, “Well it's good that you are a Christian but you need a second definitive experience which I can minister to you. Perhaps this experience will involve extraordinary revelation. Perhaps it will involve you receiving for the first time the Holy Spirit,” they say.

Do you realize that’s a challenge to the sufficiency of Christ? Christ dispenses the Spirit from the throne of grace, and all those who are in Christ are indwelt and filled by the Holy Spirit. There is no human being who can minister the Holy Spirit to another person. Christ ministers the Holy Spirit to His people. Christ fills His people with the Holy Spirit. To be in Christ is to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It is not Christ with or without the Spirit, you decide. The Spirit comes with Christ. He is even called the Spirit of Christ because if you are in Christ, you have the Spirit. It’s not Christ plus, but rather it’s the all-sufficiency of Christ, including the power and strength that we need from the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps someone has come to you and said, “There is some ritual, there's something that you must do. It's not found really in the word of God, but this particular church has declared this to be necessary for you to grow in grace.” That is the sound of the evil one whispering in your ear. We are complete in Christ. He has not left out something that we need in order to be presented before Him faultless with exceeding glory, and great joy. He has provided everything that we need. And when the whisperer comes and says you need Christ **plus anything**, you may be sure that it is the voice of a false teacher. We are complete in Christ.

If you’re seeking the favor and pleasure and joy of your heavenly Father, commit yourself ... in the power of His Spirit ... to put your spiritual affairs in good order and to stand firm and resolute and unwavering in your single-minded, wholehearted, world-denying, devotion to Jesus.

Make that your prayer. Pray for those things now.
Take a moment to do that, and then I’ll close.

Lord, we rejoice to struggle for those people who follow you, here in this church, here in our denomination, the PCA, and certainly for the church at large. We pray 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. We pray that by the power of Your Spirit, You would keep us from being deluded by plausible arguments. And we pray that You would bring good order to our spiritual lives, so that those around us can see the firmness of our faith in Christ. For we pray, in the Name of Jesus, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. Amen.

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Ephesians 1:16-18

*“I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 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.”*