

Prayers

To God

Almighty God, may we always be ready for the releasing of Your power through the Gospel. Give us a longing to see You work in our midst, and an expectation that great things will be achieved. Give us a heart to join with You in the Gospel work of salvation and deliverance, and the joy of Your presence as we work together in this great and Godly task. Thank You, Almighty God; AMEN

For myself

Pray to ask the Lord for His guidance concerning your call, and ask Him to lead your life according to the call He has placed on your life, the 'allotment' He has given you in His Kingdom.

For others

Weekly theme: the supply of power

Pray for those who have no good supply of water and have no chance of ever receiving such help.

Meditation

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my mind with good
And banish the enemy from my thoughts and feelings

When life is routine, Lord, give me concentration
To give attention to my work, and honour You within it

When life becomes difficult, Lord, save me from panic
Help me to focus on You, and trust in Your guidance

When life is horrendous, Lord, may I hold firmly to You
Drawing on Your Spirit's energy to extract me from trouble

When life is easier, Lord, may I not forget Your love
But remember Your faithfulness in good times and bad

When life is quiet, Lord, fill my heart with blessing
Yet, prepare me and keep me alert for all that's to come

Bible Passage

Colossians 1;21-29

²¹ You who were once cut off, mentally hostile, and doing evil deeds, ²² He has now reconciled you through the death of His physical body to enable you to stand in His presence as holy, faultless and above reproach, ²³ providing you continue in faith, grounded and firm, and not shifting from the hope of the Gospel you have heard which has been made known to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

²⁴ I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, completing in my flesh what is needed of the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of His Body which is the Church. ²⁵ I am a servant of the church according to the task God gave me to do, which was to make the full Word of God known to you, ²⁶ so that the mystery hidden throughout time and the generations, should now be revealed to His saints. ²⁷ Amongst the nations, God chose to make known to them the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is 'Christ is in you, the hope of glory.' ²⁸ We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone complete in Christ. ²⁹ For this work I struggle with all His strength which is so powerfully at work in me.

Review

After the amazing description of the Cosmic significance of Christ just previously (1:15-20), the letter to the Colossians continues with Paul's breathtaking explanation of Christian faith in this passage. He may have been writing to correct dangerous teaching at Colossae, but this forced him to give a compelling explanation of what Christians believe, drawing on teaching about the work of Christ consistent throughout his letters, but expressing this in fascinating and original ways. For example, this passage is about Paul's regular theme of Christ's death on the Cross for our sins; he says, '*He has now reconciled you through the death of His physical body ...*' (1:22). However, because of the situation at Corinth, he adds this powerful and fresh phrase, '*this mystery, which is "Christ in you, the hope of Glory!"*' (1:27).

The basis of what Paul said was not new, and we can find elements of what Paul says here in other Scriptures. For example, Jesus Himself talked about revealing the '*mysteries*' of God (see Luke 10:21), Jesus was also named '*God with us*' by Matthew (Matt 1:23), and another passage talks of Jesus as our '*hope*' for reconciliation with the Father (Rom 6:4). But here, Paul puts all these things together to provide us with a powerful summary of Faith, and the work of God in the believer; '*Christ in you, the hope of Glory!*' (1:27)

Previously, Paul had explained the great significance of Christ as the only mediator between God and the fallen world, but in this passage he appealed to the Colossian church community to take this clear message to heart. Nothing should stand in the way of the truth of the Gospel. Here, much of his language would be familiar to his readers from their Baptism, which was for them, as for us, a profoundly personal experience. It is believed that the words '*stand in His presence as holy, faultless and above reproach*' (1:22) were part of the liturgy of a baptism service spoken as a candidate stood awaiting baptism (see also Rom. 12:1).

To say this was not to claim that such a candidate for baptism was sinless, but they went into the waters of baptism on the evidence of their repentance and the power of Christ to save them. So by speaking in this way, Paul was appealing to the Colossians to stand firm in faith (1:23) according to their baptism, and not resort to philosophising about it! His advice is pertinent to us today!

Paul then sought to justify what he had said by referring to his own experience. Now, he is often criticised for talking about himself and his call to ministry; in this verse, for example, *'I am a servant of the church according to the task God gave me to do'* (1:25), and he goes on to speak of what he has endured as a missionary; *'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you ...'* (1:24). He spoke in this way to tell the Colossian church plainly that he was not asking them to do anything he was unwilling to do himself. The mysteries of God were not just 'talk', and the life of faith was not just a matter of debate. He, Paul, was willing to live what he believed and he expected the Colossians to do the same.

The words in our passage are not mere doctrine, a description of Christian faith through which we can pick our way to find the eternal mysteries of God. The way of Jesus Christ is primarily a pathway of faith based on Christ. Paul preached total commitment to Jesus and the Gospel, and he lived it; as is evident in the last words of the passage, *'For this work I struggle with all His strength which is so powerfully at work in me'* (1:29).

Going Deeper

The Gospel is nothing if it is not directly applicable to you and me, and as Paul explained the truth of the Gospel to the Colossians, he used powerful ideas about redemption through sacrifice, found in the Old Testament. Then, by talking about himself, he was able to explain the personal consequences of Faith in a unique way.

Keeping faith with the Gospel

The reason why Paul wrote to the Colossians was because they were debating their faith and discussing new teachings which were rooted in the philosophies and religious practices of the people of their day. Paul reminded them in no uncertain terms of what these represented (1:21), for the Gospel exposed worldly philosophies as 'mentally hostile' to God and as the source of 'evil deeds' which were morally wrong (1:21). The Good News they had earlier received from Epaphras was not something to be debated and changed, and Paul was deeply concerned about this, as can be seen from verse 23 in which he appealed to the Colossians not to 'shift from the hope of the Gospel you have heard'. Where would the Colossians be without the Gospel of God's unique love through Jesus Christ? Most of Paul's letters contain a similar balancing act on the part of Paul, on the one hand emphasising and re-telling the same Gospel of Jesus Christ that he had already preached, and on the other hand, warning against the perils of losing the salvation that had been gained (see 1 Cor 9:24-27 for another example of this).

The Christian Faith has always presented people with a choice about the truth; they can either attempt to find their own way by debating it or becoming religious, for example, or they can accept that God's truth has already been given to us in Jesus Christ. In talking about this faith, Paul naturally used the language of sacrifice which was deeply rooted in the Old Testament; the story of God's revelation through history. The offering of life to God by sacrifice was the only way to 'atone' for sins, and this was effected in Old Testament times by the killing of animals offered to God to appease for people's sin both collectively and individually (Lev 9:2,17:14). The very fact that we do not do this today is testimony that this is not God's perfect will for people, but it was the means God used, through the people of Israel, to introduce His Saviour to the world. Jesus dealt with the awful features of this world which are suffering, sin and death, by offering them to God in the sacrifice of His own body, and now it has been done, it does not need to happen again; our only response must be to recognise what He has done for us and offer thanks. Then, by baptism and through openly taking part in the life of the church, we claim for ourselves the same victory over sin that Christ won, and therefore identify ourselves with Christ. It is difficult for us to understand, but

that is God's way and the truth of Christian Faith, and this is what lies behind the whole of verse 22.

Paul went on to emphasise the importance of standing firm in this truth and not being drawn aside by other debates, but finished this important explanation of the Gospel by saying about the Gospel that it 'has been made known to every creature under heaven' (1:23)! This is a little puzzling to us unless we remember that Paul still had in mind the 'cosmic' proportions of the Gospel and what Jesus did for us on the Cross. This phrase does not mean that Paul believed that everyone on earth had actually heard the Gospel preached to them, rather, now that Jesus had died and the Gospel was being preached to Gentiles, it was available to be made known to everyone, indeed, to the whole Universe. It is difficult for us to understand the sense of liberation which Paul and the early preachers experienced, realising that the Good News of God was at last set free from the shackles of Judaism.

Paul's justification of His ministry

The real test of truth is whether it stands the test of time, for nothing is truth which can never be agreed or which is disproved soon after it is discovered (something that I dearly wish some religious academics would come to terms with). Paul regarded himself as a servant of the truth of the Gospel (1:23), and he needed to explain this to the people at Colossae, particularly those who did not know him and may have doubted his place in the church.

Paul had just explained how the death of Jesus reconciles us to God, but proceeded to say openly how his own life as a preacher of the Gospel was personally affected by the truth of what he preached. He had said that reconciliation and salvation came through the suffering of Christ (1:22) but identified himself personally with this suffering (1:24). At the time of writing, Paul was suffering in prison (see 4:18), but what he wrote (1:24) does not mean that he thought that his sufferings added anything to those of Christ for the purpose of establishing the church, rather that his own sufferings demonstrated that he personally identified himself with the message he preached, for the sake of the church. When he said 'I am a servant of the church' (1:25), we must remember that Paul, an Old Testament scholar, knew of one kind of servant in Scriptures: the 'suffering servant' of the prophecies of Isaiah (Isaiah 53). These prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but showed the path that all who followed in His footsteps would take.

Paul's last main point within this text was that whilst false teachers could speak of 'mysteries' and 'secrets' which would lead people through the hierarchies of heavenly authorities and lead a person to God (an early form of what is called 'gnosticism', a well documented heresy which most people agree lies behind the 'problem' at Colossae), the Christian Gospel had absolutely nothing to hide. Nothing was secret, indeed the mysteries of God were now 'made known' (1:27) in Christ; and in an amazingly bold step, Paul declared what some of his day might have called the 'mystery of God', which was 'Christ is in you, the hope of glory!' (1:27). Then, as if to confirm what he had said, Paul went on with an emphatic sentence which has itself become a text to preach on 'We proclaim Him' (1:28).

These two brief and great phrases all belong together, for they say, boldly, to anyone who wishes to debate the Christian Faith, that the truth is not a like a game of poker for those who know how to play it, or a mystery cult in which you can only find your way if you speak to the right people and learn the right codes. Christ, the man who brought reconciliation between the whole Universe and its maker, is there, willing to be identified with us if we are with Him, and His gift is the 'hope of the Glory of God', which means peace with Almighty God our Creator and Redeemer. Further, the proclamation of this as the Gospel of God is the sole function and purpose of the Church, who are His people; those who are happy to be identified with Him in this way and seek to tell others this open truth.

For Paul, this message was complete and absolute; nothing more was necessary and nothing was left out, and the acceptance of it was something that was 'complete' or 'whole'.

This is the sense in which he uses this word in verse 28; 'warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom so that we may present everyone complete in Christ.' Whether this word is translated as 'perfect', 'whole', or 'mature' (as in some Bible versions today), this quality is something found in Christ. For example, I call myself 'complete in Christ' because I know that in Him my sins are forgiven; but that is a far thing from saying that I am a perfect person (which I am not!), which is hopefully the same thing that Paul would have said!

Discipleship

Application

The challenge of faith

There are many Gospel truths within this passage worthy of our attention; the amazing words '*Christ is in you, the hope of glory!*' (1:27) are a challenge themselves, for we can each recall times when we could easily agree that this sums up our faith, and then we can probably also remember times when we have felt far from this pinnacle of faith. Perhaps that is the real challenge, for however many times we read the great truths of the Gospel, and we can find them within each of the great letters of Paul, the challenge we all face together with the Colossians is to hold firm to our faith in the face of the pressures of this world.

The challenge of defending the faith

There are plenty of people who are happy to bring into the Church of God a wide variety of beliefs, which can be anything from over-zealous denominationalism or various forms of so-called 'spirituality', as well as a variety of philosophical developments from our complex world, or even other faith systems in the guise of anything from health (many alternative practices, for example) to attempts at inter-faith exploration. Whilst the love of God compels us to be gracious to all the people on earth that God has made and what they believe, there is no room for us who call ourselves by the name of our Lord to compromise one part of the historic Faith we have received. We have one Saviour and are totally confident in Him; if we are not, then we are not Christians, and we do not represent the Church of God.

The power of Paul's words

Paul is uncompromising in the passage we have read today, but that is probably why his words, and not those of others, were found to be 'spirit-filled' and worthy of inclusion in God's Word. The first chapter of Colossians is wonderful to read, hard to understand in places, and yet contains the truths of the Gospel in profoundly straightforward and memorable phrases. Paul's personal struggles and suffering (1:29) were certainly for our benefit.

Ideas for what to do

- What beliefs, if any, have crept into your own life that have little to do with the saving work of Christ freely available for all who will believe in Him? This can be hard to answer, but we must engage in self examination from time to time!
- Pray for all those who find it hard to 'pin down' what they believe and express it in words. Pray that God's people will accept the challenge to be vocal; in the expression of their faith.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Do you find it easy to think of Jesus dying on the Cross for You? Whether it is difficult or not, how does verse 22 make you feel?
2. In what way do we suffer today so that the Gospel can be preached and delivered to the rest of the world?
3. Is it possible for us to know that Christ is 'in us' in the way that Paul talks about faith in verse 27?

Final Prayer

Stay with us, Lord, through all the dangers and perils of this day. Give us such a firm grasp of You that we do not let you down, and hold on to us with all the might of Your love and Your Holy Spirit, we pray. And when the day ends, give us rest. Thank You, Lord. AMEN