

## Prayers

### To God

*Pray with concern, asking the Lord to bless the world he has made despite the mess that people have made of it.*

### For myself

**Help me, Lord God, to live this day with an attitude of service towards those with whom I live and work. May I show care in tending to the needs of others, may I demonstrate compassion in my interaction with those I meet, and may I act with honesty in all situations in which I am required to serve and work with others. May I take my example from You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN**

### For others

Weekly theme: the supply of power

*Pray about the way in which oil is purchased and sold to the benefit of people who are often able to control the economies of nations. Pray for justice in the markets which govern the prices of our fuel.*

## Meditation

Show me a servant, and our God will raise a leader  
Show me a helper, and our God will raise a deacon  
Show me a student, and our God will raise a teacher  
Show me an encourager, and our God will raise a pastor

Show me the meek, and Christ will raise them bold  
Show me the enslaved, and Christ will raise them free  
Show me the poor, and Christ will raise them rich  
Show me the crushed, and Christ will raise them victorious

Show me unhappiness, and the Lord will bring joy  
Show me disease, and the Lord will bring healing  
Show me distress, and the Lord will bring relief  
Show me one who is lost, and the Lord will bring Salvation!

# Bible Passage

## Colossians 2:1-7

<sup>1</sup> I want you to know how much effort I am putting in for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me personally. <sup>2</sup> My intention is that their hearts are encouraged and united in love, so that they may have full and complete insight into the understanding of God's mystery, which is Christ Himself, <sup>3</sup> in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> I tell you this so that no-one deceives you with attractive but false arguments. <sup>5</sup> For even though I am physically absent from you, I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the strength of your faith in Christ. <sup>6</sup> So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, go on living your lives in Him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in Him and grounded in the faith, just as you were taught, excelling in thanksgiving.

## Review

Paul was a great Christian missionary and evangelist, perhaps the greatest, and in general, his letters tell us that the task of evangelism is not completed merely with the conversion of souls. Much more is required if foundations are indeed to be '*built upon Christ*' (e.g. 1 Cor 3:10-23). Those who are converted need to be built up in faith not simply by teaching and worship, but by being encouraged as they face difficulties and by having their fears and worries addressed and hopefully explained. In short, they need pastoral support, together with assurance and understanding as they face the battles of life and of faith.

Today, we think of an evangelist as someone who exercises the gift of bringing people to Christ, but when their job is done, they leave the on-going support to others. Paul would have been horrified at this. Clearly, Paul sometimes had to move on rapidly after his evangelistic work somewhere, as he did after preaching in Thessalonica (see Acts 17:1f.). His preferred method however was to remain with people to establish a church with good foundations, and this is what he had done in Corinth (see Acts 18:1-20). He felt a sense of personal responsibility for the communities founded on his evangelism and his letters show the extent of his pastoral care and oversight. He was determined that the churches established where he had been did not wander from the truth of the Gospel he preached.

All of this is very clear in our passage today. The effort Paul speaks of (2:1) was not merely his suffering in prison (as we read in 4:3,18), but a reflection of his personal work through prayer and letter writing for all the churches in the region of Colossae (including Laodicea - 2:1). His letters (such as this one) were circulated to many churches as a means of communicating and expressing concerns about a whole range of issues relayed to him, often by visitors and sometimes by letters sent to him from the churches.

Here, Paul's response to what had been told him about the church at Colossae was to tell them to focus spiritually on Christ to the exclusion of all else. He was also keen to explain that the '*mystery*' of God (2:2), a phrase that would have meant some special knowledge about God, had indeed been revealed to all people in Christ! (1:27, 2:3). He explained that the truth about God in Christ would build up the young Christian community and unite them '*in love*' (2:2). It is a fair guess, with what people believed in those days, that some people were telling the church at Colossae that there were many other mysteries they needed to know if they were to attain a full knowledge of God. Yet Paul says that to have a complete knowledge of God, they do not need anything other than Christ and His presence both in

their lives and in their churches. He says here *'that they may have full and complete insight into ... God's mystery, which is Christ' (2:2)*.

It is impressive to see the sense of obligation Paul had to a church he had not even visited. He was concerned for the whole church of God, and it disturbed him that any part of it should have to deal with heretical teaching. He was not content to sit back and tell Epaphras to go and sort out his own church. Paul knew there was a connectedness about the whole church as the *'Body of Christ'* (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12 etc.) which was spiritual (2:5). In writing as he did, he put his whole reputation on the line, insisting that the Gospel the Colossians had first heard could not be compromised (2:6), and that they should exercise personal discipline and good order in developing the life of their community (2:5,7).

Underneath the surface of what this robust text plainly says, lies the conviction of Paul that if Christ is truly the head of the Church, then all of God's people are mutually responsible for each other.

## Going Deeper

Some of the verses in this text are especially interesting, for example verses 2 and 5, because they contain some words which are unique in the Bible and are therefore especially helpful for our understanding of the Gospel.

### ***Paul – absent and yet present***

Why should Paul talk so graphically about struggling for the church in Colossae, and the nearby church in Laodicea? Some have accused Paul of saying this only for the sake of exaggeration or effect, but Paul's sense of the Church Universal was acute and far more developed than ours. In the previous passage (1:24), he had spoken of how he believed that the growth of the Church was something that was deeply associated with the sufferings of Christ; and it had to be, for the Church could not exist unless Jesus died on the Cross at Calvary. However, this suffering work of Christ was not only the spiritual truth of God's victory over all sin and death, it foreshadowed the growth of the Church itself which took place against a background of suffering and persecution, as Jesus Himself had predicted (Matt 5:11f. etc.).

Personally, Paul interpreted his own personal suffering of being locked up in a Roman jail (probably in Rome, but perhaps at this stage, during his long stay at Ephesus – see Acts 19,20) as being part of the suffering through which God worked to establish the Church, and if so, he was pleased so to suffer (1:24). He was not locked up in jail just because he was a Christian named Paul, but because he was the outspoken mouthpiece of the church, a figurehead of a kind that the Roman authorities loved to isolate and hold up to public ridicule and even death if they did not do what was required by the Roman Empire.

Reading between the lines of the New Testament as a whole, it seems likely that Epaphras heard the Gospel at Ephesus where Paul spent some time (see Acts 19,20) and then preached in Colossae, founding a church there, and possibly also at Laodicea (see the references to Laodicea, 2:1, 4:13,15,16) and maybe other places in the Lycius valley, including the main city of Hieropolis (4:13). Paul felt a close spiritual connection with these churches despite his never having been there, but this served to enable Paul to talk about the Church as a spiritual entity, and he returns to this many times over in his letters (2 Cor. 1:6; Phil 1:29; 2 Tim 1:8 etc.).

Personally, I often have a sense of the unity of God's people when in contact with Christians by email or text from various parts of the world. It is profoundly humbling to know, for example, that across the world today, churches which are suffering are often growing, and

the ones that are not (as in many Western countries) are in many cases, dying. As a Western Christian, I feel a deep spiritual debt to those who are suffering for the Gospel, whenever and wherever it happens in the world. When I hear of it, I know that in the suffering of these people whom I do not personally know, God's Church on earth is built up; and I am deeply humbled.

### ***Paul's intention in writing***

In the first chapter of Colossians, Paul wrote strongly about the unique revelation of God in Christ Jesus, and spoke of the cosmic significance of Jesus, the 'mystery which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory"' (1:27). Even though we gain the impression that Paul was attacking some kind of 'mystery' heresy being taught at Colossae (which argued that other layers of mystery lay between people and the great Creator God), Paul spoke so stridently that we also gain the feeling that he had confidence in the leadership of God's people at Colossae to stand against this heresy. Through Epaphras they had sought Paul's advice in order to deal with this more effectively, and a letter from the great man helped their cause greatly.

This seems to be the background for verse 2 which contains some interesting Greek phrases. What I have translated as 'encouraged and united' are two words that have a multitude of meanings in Greek. 'Encouraged' could mean anything from 'strengthened' to 'shored up', implying an action that prevented something important from being destroyed. This, of course, is exactly what Paul was attempting to do. He was writing to prevent outsiders coming in to destroy the Church! Strangely, the word 'united' also has many meanings. It has the sense of being brought together with a common philosophy or teaching, and in some ancient texts, the word in our passage literally means 'taught'. However, Paul's purpose was not simply to call for Christians to be 'united in love' in a general sense, but to show that this unity was based upon a common acceptance of the teaching that Christ alone is our complete and exclusive access to God.

This, then, forms the basis for what Paul calls a 'full and complete insight ...' into God's mystery, which is 'Christ Himself' (2:2). Again, Paul uses words in a peculiar way within the Greek language, using several words in succession that are built around the Greek for 'full' ('pleroma'). It reads strangely, but it may be that Paul was mocking the beliefs of his opponents, for whom this word for full ('pleroma') was linked to mysteries that they believed were yet to be revealed 'in their fullness' (we know about this from other ancient texts, not in the Bible). I explain this to try and help you understand how and why scholars are able to identify the 'mystery' cults that infiltrated the early church; and the more we know about this, the more we realise how important it was that Paul write so forthrightly against it. Even in our own day, in which so much theological knowledge has become integrally linked to academic knowledge, ordinary people can easily be given the impression that real theology is like a 'mystery cult' in which one has to be taught special knowledge before being able to say anything about faith that will be accepted by the hierarchy of the church. It is a scandal; and Paul would have said so.

Paul's straight talking is also found in verse 4. Heresy has always had the advantage of being attractive and tempting to the faithful, but the measure of Christ is the measure of truth, not of common appeal or attractiveness to the world.

### ***Paul's plain advice***

Towards the end of our passage today, Paul changes his emphasis uses language which comes from the vocabulary of the military. He does this in many places within his letters (2 Tim 2:3; Philemon 1:2), and in Colossians, it is here; 'I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the strength of your faith' (1:5). The words in question are 'good order' and 'strength'. Paul speaks to the Colossians as if they are troops standing firm against a rampaging enemy, yet winning victory against the odds simply by standing firm. This, as any student of the Roman military knows, was a great strength of the Roman Army. They could

withstand extraordinary pressure by holding their own ground in strict and disciplined formation, waiting the time to attack an enemy's weakness when it became clear. The confidence that many soldiers had under extreme pressure was an example Paul used to illustrate the qualities the Christian Church could have in Christ.

When in possession of the truth, there is no need for the Christian Church, or any of us, to engage in tactical intellectual warfare with those who wish to pull our faith apart. Truth speaks from the lives and the example of those who have found it, and the discipline of Christians to have confidence in the truth they possess and also to have poise in the face of sustained attack is essential. If we have truly 'received Jesus Christ the Lord' (2:6), we need have no fear; we are 'rooted and grounded in the Faith' (2:7). I have spelt 'Faith' with a capital 'F' at this point because it is clear that Paul is not talking about faith in general terms at all. If our Faith means anything here, it is because it is the truth. It seems to me that Christians today could be more bold in talking about 'the Faith', which is the unique revelation of God through Jesus Christ which is evidenced in the writings of Paul and in all Scripture, and is what we boldly assert to be the truth.

## Discipleship

### ***Application***

#### ***That which binds the church together***

Throughout this letter, Paul appeals to all God's people to have confidence in the heritage of faith they have received. This sounds good and commendable, but Paul does more than simply call for confidence, his letter talks about how this can be done. Much of what he says makes it plain that God's Church needs to be united in its teaching about Christ, and no effort should be spared in making sure that all Christians witness openly to the truth of the Gospel.

It is a sad truth that two thousand years later, churches are divided about so much, for a variety of theological and historic reasons, that the 'common factor' of our Faith in Christ Jesus and His unique work on the Cross for our salvation is not sufficient reason for us to do much together at all. As far as the world is concerned, 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are like two different religions as different as, for example, Judaism and Hinduism. It is therefore extremely difficult for us to talk about the 'Faith'. But there is no reason why we should not attempt to do so, for whatever church we belong to, we can all stand with Paul in our understanding of the person and work of Jesus as described in passages of Scripture such as this.

#### ***The importance of the church of God***

Paul lived and breathed the church of God, the 'Body of Christ' in both its suffering and its glory. We are called to do the same today. Satan tempts people to stand back from the church and remain uncommitted; that will not do, for we are dealing not with personal choices and preferences, but the very lifeblood of Christ in His Body, the Church, today. If Christian people of whatever denomination are prepared to be rooted and built up in Christ and Christ alone, and decide that this is their most important witness in worship and in deed; and if we can recapture the spirit of Paul who felt spiritually connected to all God's people and would do anything he could to help other Christians; and if we refuse to be bound by our own churches and ways of doing things so that we can truly be united in love; then the Lord can remake His Church amongst us now. How, I do not know, but nothing seems more exciting to me than this.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Spend some time writing down a list of the things you believe to be absolutely true about you and your relationship with God. It is worth doing this from time to time, because the very act of doing it forces us to be clear about what we believe.
- Pray for those who find it hard to express their faith and do not wish to engage with thinking about the Bible says, for example. Ask the Lord to energise His people so that they respect Him and seek and the truth of the Gospel.

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. How can our hearts be 'encouraged and united in love'? How do we know that our faith is true?
2. Is it possible for us to overcome the divisions amongst Christians in the world today and find a way to witness to the 'Faith' as God's unique truth in Christ?
3. Share with each other any examples you have of feeling spiritually united with people you have not seen or met.

## **Final Prayer**

Give us humility, Almighty Father, in the face of the great truths of the Gospel. May we handle them with dignity and care, and always remember that we are dependent upon You for everything, including our wisdom and understanding. Guide us in all truth, Almighty Father; AMEN