

The sufficiency of Christ

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[0 : 00] Today's first reading is taken from Colossians chapter 1, starting at verse 24 to chapter 2, verse 7, which can be found on page 1184 of the Church Bibles.

Now, I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister, according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

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, 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.

[1 : 30] I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. 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.

Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Thank you very much. I think you'll find it a help to turn back to that first reading that we had, the passage that we're going to be looking at together over the next few minutes, Colossians, end of chapter 1, beginning of chapter 2, which you'll find on page 1184.

If you can't find a Bible, there should be plenty around, probably underneath chairs near you, so just have a little search and do turn to page 1184. And there's also a little outline that you might find useful to follow as we go along on the back of the server sheets.

Just to stop you panicking later, we'll spend more than half our time on the first point and then move more quickly after that. So the space doesn't exactly resemble the amount of time we'll be spending on each section.

[2 : 38] If you haven't been here with us over the last couple of weeks, perhaps you're new or you're visiting, lovely to have you here. We're in the middle of this series looking at the Apostle Paul's Letters to the Colossians in the New Testament, and we've got up to the end of chapter 1, verse 23, and we'll pick it up this morning at verse 24.

But shall I lead us in prayer as we begin? Father God, you tell us that your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and we do indeed pray that that might be true this morning, that through your word you would give us light and reveal yourself to us.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Will the real Jesus please stand up?

If we were to ask people on the street their view of Jesus Christ or even went along to different churches this morning, we'd find there would be many different Jesuses on offer. So for the sceptic on the street, there's Jesus the man, the Jesus who's an inspirational example and teacher, but nothing more than that.

There's Jesus the myth, the Jesus who supposedly never existed, or Jesus the martyr, the Jesus who ultimately failed but gave his life for a cause, or perhaps Jesus the moralist, the Jesus who stands in judgment over others with his restrictive standards, or do a tour of different churches, and you may find Jesus the campaigner, the Jesus who's a sort of co-opted in support of various pet

causes, or Jesus the crutch, the Jesus who's there primarily, it seems, to help us in times of crisis, or Jesus the comforter, the Jesus who offers me health and wealth, freedom and fulfillment, solace and satisfaction.

[4 : 27] Historically, there's been Jesus the crusader, the Jesus who'd have us take up arms, and then we have the sanitized Jesus, the Jesus whose radical call is overlooked, and so who's never threatening, but approves of all my lifestyle choices and decisions.

There's a sentimental Jesus of the primary school assembly, who we nod along to at Christmas, a cute little baby in a manger perhaps. And then there's also the Jesus we were considering last week here at Grace Church when we looked at the previous few verses in Colossians chapter 1.

Not the sanitized or sentimental version, but the supreme Jesus. The awesome Jesus who can't simply be applauded from a distance or admired at Christmas, because as we saw in those verses, all things were made by him and were made for him.

A Jesus who therefore holds acclaim over our lives, and yet, as we saw last week, who's also offered up his life that we might know forgiveness and enjoy relationship with him.

Now, as well as that one that the Bible gives us, in one form or other, there will be churches this morning offering most of those other different caricatures of Jesus that we mentioned. And while most of them are based on some aspect of truth, one of the bewildering things for the person who isn't a committed follower of Jesus, and it may be that there are one or two here like that this morning, and you're very welcome, is to know which of these Jesuses is the true Jesus.

[6 : 02] Will the real Jesus please stand up? Last week, we saw that Jesus is not only supreme, but also sufficient.

Sufficient for revelation, revealing God to us, and sufficient for reconciliation, reconciling us to God. Those of us who've been here over the last couple of Sundays will remember that the Apostle Paul, who wrote this letter, Paul, that man who's at conversion and commission, we were just reading about in that second reading we had from Acts chapter 9, he was called Saul at the time.

Paul, who wrote this letter, writes to the Colossians to tell them to stick with Jesus because Jesus is all we need. Stick with Jesus because Jesus is all you need.

That's the message of Colossians as we've summarised it so far. We don't need more than Jesus to be brought back into relationship with God. Jesus has done it all by dying on the cross, so we don't need to top it up with religious rituals or good works.

And we don't need more than Jesus to know what God's like. Jesus is the image of God, and so he's revealed himself to us fully. But the question for us this morning, whether we come to those claims as a sceptic needing convincing, or perhaps a confused believer needing confidence, is how can we trust that the view of Jesus given to us here in the Bible, the Jesus who not just Colossians, but the whole Bible paints as absolutely supreme and sufficient, how can we be sure he is the authentic Jesus, that Paul's Jesus is indeed the real Jesus?

[7 : 41] Well, that's the issue, the next little section of Colossians addresses, and we're going to consider it this morning under two headings, as you'll see on the outline on the back of the service sheet. So first of all, the sufficiency of Paul's ministry.

The sufficiency of Paul's ministry. And that's largely verses 24 to 29, though it's a theme that's present right throughout the whole passage, the sufficiency of Paul's ministry. One of the puzzling things about our verses is how the subject of them changes from the previous few verses.

Verses 15 to 23 that we looked at last week, and indeed most of the letter are all about Jesus, who he is, and what he's done. Perhaps have a look later at how often the word Christ appears throughout Colossians.

And that's hardly surprising when we remember the message of the letter is Jesus' sufficiency for the Christian life. So the puzzle here is why Paul seems to stop talking about Jesus for a couple of paragraphs and suddenly starts talking about himself.

Did you notice that? That shift started at the very end of last week's passage, at the end of verse 23, where if you just look back, Paul speaks of the gospel which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

[8 : 56] And then look at the pronouns which follow in the subsequent verses. If the dominant pronouns in verses 15 to 23 were he and him referring to Jesus, from verse 24 through to verse 5 of chapter 2, the pronouns which come again and again, if you just look down and skim the verses, are I and me.

Paul is talking about himself. Well, what's going on here? Is Paul on an ego trip where he actually wants to steal some of the attention from Jesus? Is he self-absorbed or a bit defensive here, perhaps?

Well, I don't think any of those explanations fit with the picture of Paul that we get elsewhere in the New Testament. No, Paul has a very specific and good reason for talking about himself at this point in Colossians.

You see, so far, we've summarized the message of Colossians as stick with Jesus because Jesus is all you need. But I'm not sure that those in Colossae who seem to have been offering a different message, the sort of person Paul alludes to in chapter 2 and verse 4 of our passage, the false teachers, perhaps, who the Colossians were in danger of being led astray by, I'm not sure those people would necessarily have entirely disagreed with that summary sentence that we've put forward.

Yes, I think some of them probably did want to add to Jesus. But others might well have agreed that Jesus is enough. Their issue, though, was that Paul's Jesus, the Jesus the Colossians had put their trust in when they heard the gospel from Epaphras, Paul's colleague, remember, wasn't enough.

[10:32] There's more to Jesus, they would have claimed, than what Paul has told you. In order to access everything Jesus offers and to be a truly spiritual person, to encounter him fully, you need further insights.

Yes, Paul might get you to the starting line, but we can get you to the finish line and to a higher spiritual plane. Indeed, Paul, he's rather unspiritual, a bit rigid, and frankly, rather unimpressive. You see, it seems these Colossians were beginning to wonder if Paul had only given them half the story when it came to Jesus or spiritual things, and there was more about the sufficient Jesus to discover.

And of course, there are similar people around today who seek to add to the Jesus revealed to us by his own chosen apostles like Paul in the New Testament, whether that comes in the form of those who offer new words from God today or extra spiritual encounters or one of those alternative views of Jesus we considered at the beginning.

And perhaps we, like the Colossians, can easily begin to wonder or worry that there may be more to Jesus than what Paul and others have revealed in the Bible, and we fear we're therefore missing out.

[11:51] We can be tempted to look elsewhere. And that's why Paul is at pains in these verses to stress that not only is Jesus sufficient, what we saw last week, but his Jesus is sufficient.

His own ministry is sufficient for the Colossians and indeed us to know everything we need to know about the Jesus who reveals everything we need to know about God. When it comes to Jesus, Paul's ministry is sufficient.

Let's just notice how Paul establishes his credentials on this point. Have a look down with me at verse 24. He writes, Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

It may be that one of the arguments Paul's opponents had used to question whether he really was to be trusted about Jesus was his suffering. He didn't look like someone God was blessing or who was very successful when he met persecution and opposition at every turn.

But in verse 24, Paul explains that his suffering actually points to his authenticity because he was suffering for the Colossians and other Christians, putting up with multiple hardships so they could hear about Jesus.

[13:27] Indeed, that slightly strange reference to what is lacking in Christ's afflictions in verse 24 is probably a reminder that in his suffering, Paul was following in Jesus' own footsteps and facing a continuation of the same hostility Jesus had faced.

It showed him to be a real follower of Jesus. He had walked the walk as well as talked the talk. He resembled his master. But then look on to verse 25 because I think this is the key verse.

Verse 25. Paul speaks of the church, that is God's people, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you.

And what was it? To make the word of God fully known. Fully known. Do you see the claim here? Paul was appointed by God himself.

He has God's authority. And the ministry he was given was to make the word of God fully known. Not partially, but fully. We get the same idea a few verses later in verse 28.

[14 : 35] Have a look down there. Him we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom. Paul and the other apostles, notice the we in verse 28, Paul and the other apostles' teaching includes all the wisdom that's needed for Christians to know God and to grow as Christians.

It's not that we need Paul's testimony but also need something else, something different or more contemporary perhaps. no, Paul has made the word of God fully known.

His ministry is sufficient. And this is of course very good news because in a world where people are desperately searching for answers, searching for spiritual truth, we can know where to find it.

In a world where Christians can be bewildered by multiple different versions of Jesus that are on offer and are desperately seeking greater knowledge of him but don't know where to turn, we know where to find it.

Because here in the pages of the Bible, the place where we of course can read Paul and the other apostles today, the word of God has been made fully known.

[15 : 48] Just look at the extent of Paul's claim here. In verse 26 he explains that what has been revealed through him, the good news he unpacks in verse 27 that everyone can have a relationship with Jesus, was previously a mystery hidden for ages and generations.

But now what was once a mystery has been made known through Paul. So the search is over.

We're no longer in the dark. We can know about God and his verdict on our lives and how we can be put right with him and everything there is to know about him this side of heaven. We don't need to look to astrology or Ouija boards for spiritual insight nor do we need popes or new prophets to add to the Bible today with additional insights about Jesus because the Bible fully reveals the Jesus who fully reveals God.

It's very good news I think. One of the many recent rows in Parliament is concerned whether or not the government should be forced to reveal its own dossiers on various issues such as the effects of a no deal Brexit.

And I think I'm right in saying that one of the reasons there was a row was because some had accused the government of not releasing the full documents or of only giving a redacted version leaving some I guess with a fear there's more information out there we don't know about.

[17 : 13] Now I'm not wanting to make a comment on the rights and wrongs of any of that but the good news is that when it comes to Jesus the one who reveals God Paul has given us the full unredacted version.

We don't need to fear there's more information we don't know about or that we need to go elsewhere to access additional insights. Paul has made Jesus fully known.

And before we move on in case the Colossians were still tempted to doubt Paul's authority or sufficiency and therefore look elsewhere notice how else he seeks to reassure them in verse 29. He speaks of his toil and struggle which in verse 1 of chapter 2 we discover was on behalf of the Colossians themselves or in verse 5 we're told that he rejoices in the Colossians' faith and that they had been holding firm despite the temptation to look elsewhere for spiritual insight.

You see Paul cared for the Colossians he loved them and he worked hard for them. They could trust him because he put his money where his mouth was and sought their benefit.

He wasn't just in it for himself or shut away in the comfort of his own ivory tower. And incidentally isn't this very different from the contemporary caricature of the Apostle Paul that we so often get as being somehow cold or cerebral or unloving or harsh.

[18 : 44] Because here we see he was anything but that. He was deeply committed to those he served and full of joy as he ministered to them. Yeah sure what Paul teaches doesn't always fit comfortably with our 21st century secular culture but Colossians 1 tells us Paul is simply the mouthpiece for making God's word known.

So to reject his teaching is to reject God's teaching. We need to take Paul seriously. We're not at liberty to say I like Jesus but not Paul as if we can divorce Paul's authority and ministry from the commission Jesus gave him which we read about of course earlier in that reading from Acts 9.

Nor are we at liberty to have a Christianity which sidelines or disagrees with Paul's writings.

Colossians 2. So I actually think at this point we need to tweak or sharpen our summary sentence for Colossians.

Remember our working summary has been stick with Jesus because Jesus is all you need. But I wonder whether actually it would be more accurate to summarise Colossians in this way. Stick with Paul's Jesus because Paul's Jesus is all you need. Stick with Paul's Jesus because Paul's Jesus is all you need.

[20 : 04] His ministry is sufficient for knowing the sufficient Jesus. So that's our first main heading this morning the sufficiency of Paul's ministry. Here's the second which follows on from this and as I said earlier we won't spend quite as long on this one.

The sufficiency of Paul's ministry for all Christians to know Jesus fully. For all Christians to know Jesus fully. We've already begun to think about this but notice how Paul stresses that when it comes to the Christian life his ministry is sufficient to help every type of person in every way they need for every day of their lives.

Over the last couple of weeks we've observed how Colossians is full of a family of words that emphasize comprehensiveness words like all every fullness and so on.

And in our verses today those same words are used of Paul's ministry. We've already seen the use of fully in verse 25 and all in verse 28 for example. But notice also the threefold use of everyone in verse 28.

Have a look down with me. Him that's Jesus we proclaim a reminder that again that Paul wasn't simply being self-centered with all this talk about himself it was Jesus he was wanting to talk about.

[21 : 24] Him we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Paul has just been talking about Gentiles non-Jewish people in verse 27 and the everyone's of verse 28 remind us that his ministry about Jesus is sufficient for every type of person Jew or Gentile first century or 21st century those from Christian backgrounds and those who've barely ever opened a Bible in their life.

But not only is Paul's ministry sufficient for everyone in verse 28 in that he warns and teaches everyone with all wisdom but it's also sufficient for everyone for their whole Christian life.

Look at how verse 28 ends. Him we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

Mature. And that word mature could be translated and often is complete. So again Paul's saying that his message about Jesus won't just get you to the start of the Christian life but to the very end to completion.

Nothing else is needed. For any Christian to keep going on any day of their life apart from what has been fully revealed in the person of Jesus.

[22 : 48] Paul's Jesus the authentic Jesus is able to bring us to full maturity to completion in the Christian life. So if we're here and we're not a Christian and we want to know what God is really like and what he wants from our lives and whether it matters whether we know we know what he's like we need to look to Jesus.

But also if we are Christians and want to grow as Christians we need to continue to depend on the same Jesus we first heard about and the Colossians first heard about.

I guess many of us here will have watched Dina Asher Smith win a gold medal in the 200 meters in the recent Athletics World Championships. And one of the lovely things about her story is that she's had the same coach since she was nine years old.

Her coach didn't simply get her to the point where she could start an athletics career after which she moved on to someone else as I guess so many other athletes do when they hit the big time. No but he has been sufficient to bring her to full maturity as an athlete and to win the ultimate prize of a global gold medal.

And Paul is saying that Jesus he proclaimed, the real Jesus is like that for the Christian, able to bring us to maturity, completion in the Christian life.

[24 : 12] We never reach a point where we need something different. And notice how Paul develops a point in the next few verses. Chapter 2, 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, 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.

What was Paul's goal for the Colossians? Why had he suffered and strived and struggled for them? Well, verse 2, in order that they would 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.

Notice those words again. All the riches of full assurance of understanding and wisdom concerning Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Paul wants the Colossians to have it all when it comes to what's on offer in the Christian life. Total assurance, full understanding, complete wisdom, comprehensive knowledge.

And his ministry is sufficient for the Colossians to have exactly that, to know Jesus fully. And because of that, Paul has a warning and an encouragement for the Colossian Christians at the end of our passage.

[25 : 49] The warning is there in verse 4. Have a look. He writes, I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

So the warning is that there are those who will try to deceive or delude the Colossians with arguments that sound plausible. And it's a reminder to us that there will be people out there who will try to offer us distorted versions of Jesus or of the Christian faith.

And that they may sound very plausible. Their message may be attractive or sound convincing or they may use or misuse Bible verses to back it up. I guess it shouldn't surprise us that all those different versions of Jesus that I listed at the beginning are out there, are on offer today.

Because even back in Paul's day there was a danger of Christians being deluded by people offering the additional key that would supposedly unlock spiritual success or insight or guarantee progress and triumph in the Christian life.

Such people were very seductive I guess but were actually bogus because their message didn't insist on continuing with the same gospel message revealed by Paul.

[27 : 03] That's why we too need to be aware of other versions of Jesus that we might hear. And we need to be beware of any times we might be tempted to move away from Paul's Jesus.

Whether to a Jesus who seems more culturally palatable or to a spirituality that feels more exciting or one which offers a quick fix or instantaneous results or something more tangible than what has been revealed through Paul and the other apostles.

Which is of course actually the most exciting and wonderful news on offer. So don't be deceived says Paul. And in the rest of chapter 2 which we'll come on to next week we'll see how we outline some of the ways the Colossians were at risk of being deceived.

Some of the distorted messages that were being peddled to them. Don't be deceived he warns. But because of this Paul also says don't change direction.

Don't change direction. And that's the encouragement in verses 6 and 7 which we've looked at in previous weeks and which are in many ways the key verses of the letter and this is where we'll finish.

[28 : 13] So verse 6 have a look down with me. Verse 6. Therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving.

You see because the Jesus the Colossians had received from Paul Varapathras was sufficient for everything in the Christian life the Colossians were to continue in the same way they'd begun to walk in him just as they had received him to be rooted and built up and established in the very same faith they had first been taught.

No additional teaching or guru was needed. You'll notice that Paul uses a number of metaphors here to illustrate his point. Just as a tree grows by staying connected with its roots and a building goes up in line with its foundation so Christians grow spiritually by sticking to their roots.

The same message which was laid as the foundation of our Christian lives at the beginning. Healthy trees and stable buildings don't suddenly veer off in a completely different direction from their roots or foundations and nor are we to do so as Christians but rather to continue to walk in the same direction we started off because the Jesus we walk in is utterly sufficient until the very end of our lives in this world.

I guess this is a reminder to us that we never graduate in the Christian life. Sure there are great riches in the Bible and there's always more to learn but we're never to move on from or grow out of the basics about Jesus in the Bible.

[29 : 59] So for Olivia whose life we've been celebrating this morning what Tim and Amelia will teach her about Jesus as a two year old or three year old will be exactly the same message she'll need to hear when she's 92 or 93.

As we've said before the way in in the Christian life is also the way on. To move on from the Jesus of the Bible is to move away from Jesus. Instead we are to walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as we were taught.

Shall I lead us in prayer? Therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught abounding in thanksgiving. Heavenly Father we thank you that because Jesus is sufficient for everything in the Christian life for getting right with you and for staying right with you. we thank you that because of that and because what has been revealed to him by Paul and the other apostles is everything that you want us to know about him.

That we don't need to go searching desperately for other spiritual insights. And so we pray that you would indeed help us to be those who continue in the same way that we started in the Christian life. [31 : 23] To walk in Jesus. To be established in the faith that we were taught. And because we are so grateful that Jesus has done it all to be abounding in thanksgiving. And we ask it for his name's sake.

Amen. I'm not sure my camera is at all because I've handed them over and had an Blind One. Kings is bent and what they have in the world has been typically the best. We have some software to prevent them from power though.

I'm sorry. I'm sure your gaming is fine.