

Let the Word do the Work

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[0 : 00] 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 the 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.

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.

[1 : 51] For though I am not being given something they have, they are given something they don't deserve. We don't deserve any of this, but it's easy over time to think that we do.

And this is to sort of take our eye off just what God's grace has given us, and the privileges that we have, and the future that we have.

And therefore, when we understand that we have both grace and peace in Christ Jesus, we are then firm in the hope. We're not going to shift away from what is coming our way in Christ Jesus.

The hope that we have is something that will keep us firm and steady. And we recognize that outside of Christ Jesus, we have no hope.

At least we would understand that if we understood what Paul is teaching us clearly. That doesn't stop people, of course, in thinking and believing that they can have hope in things.

[2 : 54] Even a temporary hope can give temporary fulfillment. And so this is not the type of hope we're talking about. We're talking about an eternal hope that can give an eternal fulfillment.

God's desire is, of course, to rescue sinners, to bring people into his kingdom. And, of course, when people are saved, the work doesn't stop there.

And that's what this section is about. That the moment a person is saved, the work doesn't stop, but rather begins in the church.

God saves a person, and then, of course, he has people to work with saved people, to work with his church. And his church, of course, is the means by which the gospel is proclaimed.

And, therefore, we must be very careful when, if we ever are tempted to use the language, God is at work or God isn't at work. You know, wherever the gospel is being proclaimed, God is at work.

[3 : 58] And we should never think otherwise. That's how we know God is at work, because the gospel is being proclaimed. Also, here, Paul recognizes that the gospel has to continually be proclaimed.

That is the word of God. We recognize that, perhaps, if you read around now, that there's a very sort of a glitchy phrase called gospel-centered.

I'm not all that keen on it for a number of different reasons, because it reduces everything down to, unless you're talking about the salvation of individuals, you're not gospel-centered.

Well, I think from our last section, to understand that Christ is preeminent over everything, it's much better to say Christ-centered, of which Christ is preeminent over everything, so that we don't rule out anything, so that we can talk about everything.

We can talk about the kingdom of God. We can talk about being productive in the world, and we're still centered on the work of God. That's really important, that we don't reduce what God has given us down just to the salvation of sinners, though that is incredibly important.

[5 : 10] It is not the fullness of what we have received in Christ Jesus. Now, of course, you'll notice in this section that Paul is suffering for the sake of the gospel, meaning that wherever he proclaims the gospel, there is going to be an oppression, because he's proclaiming the gospel.

Some people receive, and others don't. And then, of course, he has struggles within the ministry.

And it's kind of awkward being a minister, then having to try and talk about and proclaim the struggles that a minister has with the church, or the struggles that can exist within this.

But there's only one reason for continuing in ministry, and that is because of what God deserves.

The reason we put up with everything, and Christians will put up with all the sort of things that come against them in this world, is because of what God deserves.

We're not doing it for any other reason. The reason Paul will put up with the suffering and the affliction that comes his way is because God deserves sinners to hear the gospel.

And so that overrides any thought that he might have of, I don't deserve to suffer. Well, he takes that hand in hand with the fact that God deserves to be made known.

[6 : 38] And it's the same with the struggles that he has amongst God's people, because the desire is that God wants these people fully mature. He wants them to be fully, he wants them to know the word of God fully, and he wants them to become fully mature.

The reason for this is because God's word is true, which we know. The truth sets us free. But the truth often comes to people in the same way growing pains do.

When one person says to another person, you just don't like to hear the truth, no one likes to hear the truth. We love to hear the truth when it's not addressing us when we're in a place of being wrong.

But when it's, like growing up, my mom's saying to me, well, you just don't like to hear the truth. And it took me years to realize these are growing pains. Truth hurts like growing pains do, because truth is the means by which God matures you.

And so when we hear the truth of God's word, and it feels uncomfortable, and it feels slightly painful, that's the growing pains of God's word. We're growing up.

[7 : 52] Truth will never damage you, it'll never hurt you, it'll never cause you any harm, but it'll feel like growing pains. You know, God wants us to repent because he wants us to change.

Truth matters. So the pain associated and the struggle associated here is not necessarily a bad thing to feel this kind of struggle and pain.

It's a good thing in the same way growing pains are incredibly uncomfortable when you have them, but they're producing something good. And this is what the suffering and struggle is here.

So let's not look at this as something that is negative. It's actually indicating something that is important to God and to his people.

So here's really the summary of what's happening. Paul, as you can see, is exposed, but he says, I'm exposed in such a way where I'm rejoicing in my sufferings.

[8 : 53] Verse 24. His calling is to make the word of God fully known, and he knows that the moment he does this, fully known, is another way of saying that not only am I to declare the whole word of God, I am to declare the whole word of God to all the people in the world, well, at least the amount of people that he can reach.

But he knows that as he does this, some people will respond to the word favorably and others won't. And those who are opposed to the gospel will therefore be opposed to Paul.

And so suffering comes precisely because Paul is committed to proclaiming the word of God fully. He will not be accepted favorably by all, and therefore he will suffer.

But he rejoices because it's a suffering caused by doing the right thing. It's a suffering that he welcomes because he's serving the purposes of God on earth.

But then he recognizes that his role is not just to make the word of God fully known, so that the unsaved can become saved.

[10:10] But he is to make believers fully mature. And this is the second part of what he's saying here. And therefore, serving God is linked to suffering and struggles.

It's linked to the people of God in that they are to become mature. And of course, it's linked to the word of God, because the word of God is the only means by which men and women, boys and girls will become saved.

And those same men and women, boys and girls will become mature. We don't depart from the word of God to then do something else with Christians. We continue with them in the word of God. Paul understands that God's desire, and of course his desire and the desire of Christians, is hopefully to remain firm in the faith with full assurance and understanding, and to become mature, to grow up.

And the reason for growing up is so that you can be strong and firm and not shift from the hope that every single day, however tough it may be, you are absolutely convicted with full assurance that being a Christian is to be a person of God who will one day enter into the hope.

[11:32] It's tough now, but it won't always be. We are thoroughly optimistic about the future. There is no room for a pessimistic outlook as you read the New Testament.

There's just no room for it. It's victory. It's glorious. It's difficult. But nonetheless, the promises that are made will be promises kept.

And that's what we learn once we have learned the word of God. At least that's what we become assured about. We're completely assured of the fact that the promises God made are the promises that God would keep.

He goes on to say, of course, that the ministry of the word doesn't stop at conversion. It continues into the Christian life because Christians must become mature.

And one of the reasons that they must become mature, at least what he's dealing here in Colossians, is that there is false teaching, and false teaching is linked to false teachers, but false teachers never look like false teachers.

[12:37] They look like you do. They look like people, you know, but they have ideas. They have thoughts that are not consistent with the word of God. And they're plausible.

Their words are plausible. They're able to lead people astray. And, of course, deceptive arguments never appear deceptive when it's happening.

The fact that you can be taken from one position to another position and not understand how it's done is the very means of being deceived. You know magic doesn't happen, and so you know you've been tricked, but you can't figure out how you've been tricked when you're watching something like that on a magic show.

So plausible arguments are arguments where you go, that sounds right to me, when it's wrong. And then you're taken away by those arguments.

In the same way a parent might say to her child, you didn't learn that from me. Or a parent might say to her child, you didn't learn that growing up in this home.

[13:47] Nevertheless, it will be the parent who will have to deal with what the child is thinking and believing. That the parent doesn't get to deal with those who've given their children those ideas or those beliefs or those behaviors.

And so the parent can say, well, you didn't learn that from me. But the parent knows immediately that they're going to be the one who will have to deal with it. Paul, as he speaks to this church, is speaking to people where he can literally say, you didn't learn that from me.

That's come from these false teachers, but Paul is the one who's going to have to straighten it out. And the reason that's the case is because false teachers won't. They're not interested in that because they're not motivated by what God wants.

They're motivated by a gathering. They're motivated by having people follow them, by having likes. And so when parents have to deal with things that are turning up in their children, which are caused by other people, that's exactly the same thing which happens in churches and has always happened in churches.

It increased dramatically with the age of the Internet because now suddenly everyone can post anything that they like with very little qualification.

[15:11] And this has been noticed with great damage in the world of history because the moment you have a digital record rather than a hardback book on your shelf, it's very easy to change the data online.

And we hear about that man in France who wanted to erase a certain part of his history under EU law and some parts he could do and other parts he couldn't.

Well, that's the type of world that we live in, that kind of deception. So Paul, in wanting to make the gospel fully known, is not to make clever Christians.

It's to make stable Christians. It's to make Christians who will remain firm in the faith. It's to keep them safe. The Word of God doesn't just teach. It feeds.

And therefore, that strength is not a... It is a knowledge to know what is true from what is false. But it is to keep you absolutely firm in your faith and not be led astray.

[16:17] So here's the first thing that he does, very importantly. And I've sort of taken this title from Broughton Knox. Broughton Knox was an incredible theologian. And he had written this essay many years ago called Let the Word Do the Work.

And I thought of no better title than using that here. What is Paul doing in making the Word of God fully known and making believers fully mature?

Well, he's letting the Word do the work. Christians must be convinced that the Word of God can do what the Word of God says it can.

That it can convert the unsaved and that it can make the saved mature. And so Paul just lets the Word of God do the work. And the way that he lets the Word of God do the work is just by speaking it.

Just by teaching it to men and women, boys and girls. And so he rejoices in the suffering because of the overwhelming and incredible purpose of the Word of God and what it will do for people.

[17:27] But struggles and sufferings are always going to be absorbed. They don't sit on the surface. They are absorbed by Christians. So Christians really do struggle.

And Christians really do suffer for their faith and struggle in ministry because these things are absorbed. They're never something that you can put aside to deal with later.

They're something that you have while you get on with everything else. But he's going to rejoice in this because he rejoices in the fact that the Word of God will do the work. He's the means by which it is proclaimed.

But the Word will do the work. Now, he identifies with Christ's sufferings in the same way Christ identifies with the sufferings of his church.

You remember Paul's conversion, Saul at the time. And Jesus says, why are you persecuting me? And, of course, Paul is killing Christians at this point.

[18:28] But Jesus identifies himself with his church. And if his church is suffering, is being persecuted, then he is being persecuted because he is the head of the body of the church.

Well, Paul, now being a Christian, is now suffering in the same way that he's not, of course, suffering like Christ did on the cross.

But he's suffering the persecution of proclaiming that comes from proclaiming the gospel. So, Paul now identifies with that suffering where at one point he was the cause of that suffering.

But now he identifies with it because the Word of God has done the work in his own life. And now he knows that he is to proclaim this Word.

Where does this go wrong in the church? Well, I think it goes wrong at the point where Christians in the pews and even in the pulpits lose confidence in the Word of God where we no longer believe it's sufficient.

[19:33] And we think that something else must be needed to make things happen. We need to come up with a different plan. We need to come up with a vision. We need to come up with this. We need to come up with that.

We don't need to come up with any of that. All we need to do is to be truthful to the Word. Let the Word do the work accompanied by the Spirit of God. We're not neglecting the Holy Spirit at all.

The Holy Spirit is only mentioned once in this letter. But that's not because the Holy Spirit is being neglected. It's rather because other things are being addressed. And so the Word and the Spirit goes out and it accomplishes the work of God.

But when Christians lose confidence in God's Word that it's no longer sufficient to do what it's meant to do, then suddenly we try other things.

And of course, desires can become skewed. I wrote on a post a long time ago now, several weeks ago, that why do parents desire obedient children?

[20 : 39] And if the answer that you come to is to make my life easier, then the problems that you're going to have resulting from that are going to be huge. Parents should desire the obedience of their children for exactly the same way God desires the obedience of his children.

Because it makes them mature. It makes them grow up. It keeps them safe. The reason for it is because it is beneficial.

It is a blessing. And the only thing that can actually cause that is for the Word of God to do the work. And so as he proclaims the Word of God, words are incredibly important.

There were a couple of guys back in the day who came up with what's called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which in linguistics means that words have a particular way of shaping people.

Well, God's been saying that all the time. Asaph, in Psalm 73, doubts. And his doubts are deep and they're wide and they're difficult to deal with.

[21 : 50] And he hasn't yet gone back to church. But the moment he does, he begins to worship God and God sorts him out. But in Psalm 73, he's doubting God's goodness.

He can't understand why the wicked prosper while being good. He keeps his heart clean every day and he goes out and he sees wicked people, you know, getting away with everything and having the best that there is.

He can't understand it. And he begins to doubt. And he understands in Psalm 73 that doubts are always going to be expressed through words. They start as what you feel.

They go on to what you think. And then they're expressed through words. But he stops himself from ever speaking those words to other people in the congregation. Why?

Because though he is able to handle his doubts to the point where he hasn't yet completely fallen away from God, he recognizes that if he speaks those same words to other people who are weaker, they may not be able to handle them and they could fall away.

[22 : 51] So he keeps his mouth shut. Because words have a particular power of shaping people. And so he will say some things, but he will not say all things.

And this is what it means to become fully mature in the word of God, that we need all of God's word because it is the word of God that shapes us.

It's the word of God that gives us the full assurance, that gives us the hope, that gives us the stability and the firmness. Because words can actually do the opposite, depending on what those words are conveying, what truth or lies, rather, they are conveying.

So never mess around with words. We let the word of God do the work, because it's the word of God that builds up, lies, tear down, which we have seen already.

The reason for this is because of maturity. Why maturity? Well, this is the striking point, that Paul is effectively saying that a profession of faith is not enough.

[23 : 56] A profession of faith is not enough. And the reason why it's not enough is because, in the same way a young child can be tricked by having a coin pulled from behind their ear, and they still to this day have no idea, where, man, I could go to the shops if I could do this myself.

You know, they have no idea how the coin got there, or how you got it out. And Paul understands that immature Christians are like that, that they can be easily deceived.

Ask, how did that happen? I can see it with my own eyes that you got the coin. And it seems to have come from behind my, and the first thing that children do when they're young is they actually put their own hands behind their ears to check if there's another one.

How did you do that? Well, what seems obvious to us is entirely perplexing and confusing to young children. And so Paul understands that a mere profession of faith isn't enough.

It may declare that you're saved, but it will not be enough to keep you stable and firm in the world, to keep you away from the people who seek to tell you lies.

[25 : 14] And of course, when a person is told a lie and they believe a lie, they don't believe they're believing a lie when they believe a lie. They believe they're believing what's true.

And so you can see it in immature children, which is probably young children who are immature in a number of different ways. You can see it in them because they will sometimes say, when you tell them something that's a bit of a joke, and they'll go, is that true?

Because they don't know. They're unable to distinguish the difference between what is right and what is wrong. Well, in exactly the same way, believers who have just made a profession of faith are in that same danger zone.

And they can easily be led astray by those who do not belong to God. So what does this mean?

Paul's desire is that you would hear the word of God so that you would become stable, so that you would become firm in your faith. And of course, there's room for conscience here, as Romans 14 says.

[26 : 22] But as Romans 14 also teaches, that there is a difference between strong and weak Christians, and Christ has died for both. But it's not a matter of indifference, as though it doesn't matter if you're strong or you're weak.

No, it really does matter that you are strong. There's always going to be room for matters of conscience, but there's never room for indifference, as though you could be either or, and it doesn't matter.

No, it matters that you become strong because Paul's desire is that you never fall away from the faith, that you're never taken captive by plausible words, that you remain firm, that you have full assurance, and that you walk with God.

And sometimes we forget just how sophisticated these lies are, and so I'll just give you a couple, just to show you a couple of what looks like innocent sayings in the church.

So a person might say, for instance, not in relation to the word of God, but Hebrews says that we are not to neglect the gathering together. Now, it's possible, isn't it, to then go, well, where are the exceptions?

[27 : 38] And I think the exceptions are fairly easy to see, but then there's the matters of conscience, and those who are weak in faith, and those who are fearful. There's loads of situations that can come in.

But someone might turn this saying into something like this, well, you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. And that's a very carefully crafted, sophisticated lie.

And here's why. Because what it's doing is it's changing the parameters of what's actually being taught. What they're doing is they're guarding their speech on the basis that going to church doesn't make you a Christian, which is true.

It doesn't make you a Christian. But they're saying it in such a way where they never explain what God actually expects from Christians. So while you can't say that they're wrong, the implicit and the explicit statements that can actually come out of it are wrong.

Because what they're saying is, is you don't have to go to church to be a Christian, which is another way of saying, I don't have to go to church. And that's not what the Word of God is teaching.

[28 : 56] It's careful, it's sophisticated, but it's not true. It's getting you to focus on the fact that salvation is by grace alone, which is true, but it doesn't seek to explain to you what Christ actually requires of those who are Christians, which is, do not neglect the gathering together.

It's very, very clear. Another sleight of hand that's been popularized in the Christian church of late is the changing of words from temptation to attraction.

And so Christians, which we have seen, again, it's another sophisticated, very clever type of lying, but they'll say that a person cannot help what they are attracted to.

Well, the Bible never speaks in those terms. The Bible always speaks in desires and temptations. And so their conclusion is, I can't help it, God made me this way.

Again, it's very clever, it's very sophisticated, but it's not true. We're fallen and we're in need of redemption, of being made new.

[30 : 10] So here's the exhortation as we close. Be assured that the evidence of God being at work in the church is that you're at work. The evidence that God is at work in the Colossian church is that there are people serving the word of God.

Paul is writing to them. The evidence that God is at work here is that you're here. The evidence that God is at work here is that I'm declaring the word of God. Now, it may be tempting for someone with a very limited understanding of the word of God to come into a place like this and go, God isn't at work.

And my answer would simply be, and do you think that all these people are doing this in their own strength? Where do you think they do this? Where do you think they get the strength to do this from?

God is at work here because, look, you're here. I'm declaring the word. People are serving at the back. People are serving at the door. God's people are serving God's church.

And that's how we identify God being at work. Very, very simple. Now, the world, the flesh, and the devil will be against the gospel and it will be against any of those who are committed to the gospels.

[31 : 25] There is suffering which comes from being committed to the word and there are struggles which come from declaring people to become mature in Christ. But all of this exists for one very simple reason.

We know that it only takes a throw of one stone to break a window but it takes more than one action to make a window. And that means that anything can be broken in an instance but it takes a long time for something to become mature.

For something to grow up. So, one action to break something cannot be mended in one action. And that's the simplest distinction I can make between sin and lies and truth and goodness.

It takes one stone to break a window but it takes more than one action to make one. And that's the definition between these false teachers and maturing people in Christ.

Change can happen very quickly with lies and very slowly with the truth. So, God's desire for you is to be stable and faithful.

[32 : 36] To be stable and faithful. You must be convinced then that the work of God doesn't stop at conversion. That a profession of faith is not enough and truth can often hurt like growing pains.

But it is the means by which God knits you together in love and keeps you safe for eternity. Amen.