

FLOURISH - Week 2

Monday, September 20

This is our second week of our Flourish study, working through the book of Colossians. Years ago, right after graduate school, Sandy and I had the chance to visit a church in Michigan. We went there because the church was considering inviting us to move to Michigan and join their pastoral team. The church was quite large. They had ten pastors at the time and a thriving ministry right outside Detroit. When we arrived, though I had never met the senior pastor, he seemed to know a lot about me. This seemed a little strange, but I discovered that he called the seminary and talked to my advisor and some of the other professors that knew me. He had come to know me through their eyes before we met in person. Now, as we think of the next section of the book of Colossians, that is how people first come to know God. They come to know about him.

As the book of Hebrews explains:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. -Hebrews 1:1-2

Here we learn that at first people did not know God personally. They only knew about God. God sent prophets to tell them. But something was missing. They could know about God this way. But they wouldn't know God for themselves. But we are told that in Jesus, God has done something completely different.

The next verse explains that Jesus is not another prophet to come and tell us about God: *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.* -Hebrews 1:3

He is the Son of God revealing the nature of God in every way. Before Jesus came, people only had a second-hand knowledge of God. They knew about God. But, in Jesus, we meet God face to face. We see who God really is. We call this the incarnation. It means that God himself took on human flesh.

Here is how the 4th century creed the Nicene Creed puts this truth into words:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father. Through him all things were made.

Now those words were written down in 325AD, but what they were trying to say was beyond capturing in words. They were saying that if we know Jesus, we know God. In a real and personal way. Not as a concept or idea. But as a person. In Jesus, we don't see a piece of God. No, Jesus is God as the Father is God. God in fullness. Now, they wrote that down in word because Jesus came, and people met him. They discovered he was unlike any other man. The wind and the waves obeyed him. He had the power of life and death. He could lay down his own life and take it up again. The Jewish people that first knew Jesus would not be easily convinced of this. They knew God as sovereign over the universe, holy and without sin. They knew God to be incomprehensible and wise, holy and just in all his ways. They knew God as patient and loving. They had a close-up view of Jesus. The disciples didn't have a snapshot. They had a video. They walked with him. They ate with him and learned from his teaching. They knew Jesus and reached the only conclusion possible. Here is God come to us. Now, we read these words all these years later, and we miss the magnitude of it all. God came and walked among us. We heard his voice and met with him.

Here is the description from the book of Colossians:

¹⁵ *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.* ¹⁶ *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.*

-Colossians 1:15-16

Now, no Jewish person could bring himself to say such things about a man. Yet this is what Paul is saying. Now, the way the text explains it: Jesus made the God we cannot see, seeable. God who does not have a body as we have, but is pure Spirit. He has come to us.

As we read in the opening words written by the apostle John to the church in Ephesus, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² the life was made manifest...* -1 John 1:1-2

We can not only know about God through the word of the prophets. We saw him. We heard him speak. We touched him with our hands. This is the most important moment in our world. God came to town. We can know him in Christ and enjoy him.

Now, all those years ago, Sandy and I had the chance to travel to Michigan to meet the man that had come to know us through other people. We met face to face. It was no longer second-hand knowledge, but personal knowledge. This is what God wants with each of us.

Let's pray:

Lord, we know about you, but we want to know you personally. Reveal your glory to us through Jesus, and fill us with your Spirit. Thank you for drawing near to us and giving us the privilege and joy of coming to you. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, September 21

When Australian punk rocker, Nick Cave, picked up the New Testament and read the gospel of Mark, he was shocked. He'd heard about Jesus, the Jesus of the church, but what he discovered in scripture was nothing like the caricatures he'd heard.

Here's Nick:

The Christ the church offers us, the bloodless, placid "savior"—the man smiling benignly at a group of children, or calmly serenely hanging from the cross—denies Christ his potent, creative sorrow or his boiling anger that confronts us so forcefully in Mark. Thus the church denies Christ his humanity, offering up a figure we can perhaps "praise," but never relate to.

It is true that often the church tames Jesus by giving us a picture of Jesus that is unreal. He is sanitized so that he doesn't offend our sensibilities. To return to the gospels and hear about Jesus afresh...well... is refreshing. We find Jesus confronting the religious authorities, calling them snakes. We find Jesus facing down a religious mob bent on violence. He is no sanitized savior. He is wild and free. Now, here is the problem for many people in talking about God. They speak in general about who God is. But, in Jesus, we have a particular person, someone that lived and breathed, someone that was seen and known. We have God, not as an idea, but a specific individual, Jesus. Now, this has been called the scandal of particularity. Yes, it is easy to talk about ideas of God, and what God is like. But this is one particular person. This is Jesus. He is God? How can that be? He was born at a particular time and living in a specific community and lived a solitary life. This one is God. Now, God gave his people a moral code. They could not see God and live. But here we have a person. Not a myth like the story of Robin Hood. We have a man that became indignant around uncaring religious leaders, a man that wept at the grave of his friend, a man that became furious at the religious system that was keeping people from God. We have a man that is God.

Now, as we read Colossians, Paul has an immense problem. How can you begin to describe Jesus? He is God, as we are told in the gospel of John. But, not God as an idea. God in person as we have been learning. Two major heresies arose in the church about Jesus. The first said that Jesus was the messiah and was sent by God, but not God. He was really just an extraordinary man. He was fully man but no more God than any other man. We find this teaching among the Jehovah's Witnesses today and also some other cults. These folks miss the teaching about God like we have in Colossians. The second heresy was that Jesus appeared to be a man so that God could make contact with humanity, but that is all. He appeared to be a man, but was not. He was fully God, but not man at all. These folks believe he is God and worship him, but they deny his humanity.

Here is our text for today:

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...

-Colossians 1:17-19

Now, notice that Paul does not retell the story of the things that Jesus did during his earthly ministry. The people know his story. Paul is trying to tell us what the story of Jesus, the life of Jesus means. Here is the view from 30,000 feet. This one born of Mary made all things. The man that walked the towns and villages of Galilee, sustains the creation moment by moment. The one that inhabited time and space, lived in a Jewish neighborhood, and the whole of creation is his. Because of this, he is first, preeminent, and before all things. Again, this is heady stuff when we make the connection to who God is and the person of Jesus. Yes, the baby born in Bethlehem is God, incomprehensible but now made accessible to us. He is like every man that has lived, but completely unlike every other man. When we begin to understand this, we see it for the scandal that it is. The eternal God cannot become a human being. But, he did. We bow before him and worship him. Now, this teaches us about humankind. If God can dwell in man, what must human beings be? This honors us as human beings. Also, if we see God in human flesh, we are shown what human life is meant to be. When Jesus says to us, "Come and follow me," he means it. We can come after him and become his disciples.

Now, I want to return to the Australian punk rocker. After reading the gospel of Mark, he wrote an introduction to the gospel.

In part, he said:

The essential humanness of Mark's Christ provides us with a blueprint for our own lives so that we have something we can aspire to rather than revere, that can lift us free of the mundanity of our existences rather than affirming the notion that we are lowly and unworthy. Merely to praise Christ in His Perfectness keeps us on our knees, with our heads pitifully bent. Clearly, this is not what Christ had in mind. Christ came as a liberator. Christ understood that we as humans were for ever held to the ground by the pull of gravity - our ordinariness, our mediocrity - and it was through His example that He gave our imaginations the freedom to fly. In short, to be Christ-like.

Let's pray together:

Lord God, thank you for taking on human flesh so that we might know you. You show us life as you intended us to live it from the beginning. Guide us by your Spirit as we follow Jesus. Empower us to live in him, and to walk as Jesus did. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, September 22

The author Charles Sheldon closes chapter 1 of his book entitled, *In His Steps*, by telling us about a drunk that just cannot understand Christians. He hears them talk about Jesus, and he wonders why they do not live more like Jesus. Here's the man explaining how he sees it:

:I heard some people singing at a church prayer meeting the other night,

*'All for Jesus, all for Jesus,
All my being's ransomed powers,
All my thoughts, and all my doings,
All my days, and all my hours,'*

and I kept wondering as I sat on the steps outside just what they meant by it. It seems to me there's an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people who sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following his steps? It seems to me sometimes as if the people in the big churches had good clothes and nice houses to live in, and money to spend for luxuries, and could go away on summer vacations and all that, while the people outside the churches, thousands of them, I mean, die in tenements, and

walk the streets for jobs, and never have a piano or a picture in the house, and grow up in misery and drunkenness and sin."

Now, Sheldon's book is what pushed people to make the WWJD bracelets. To ask: What would Jesus do? This man's observation should be a challenge to us. Are we following Jesus?

Now, our text in Colossians for this week has this interesting statement:
And he is the head of the body, the church. -Colossians 1:18

Yes, the church is called the body of Christ. Christ Jesus is given to us as more than an example. He is the source of the church, the fountain head. Oftentimes, that word for head comes to mean, not just that which is first or preeminent, but the whole thing itself. That is what we are being told here. The body of Christ is just that. Christ's own body, living the life of Christ. The church is to take its bearings, draw its life, learn the way of love from the head, from Jesus himself. The goal in the gospel is to redeem a people who will come to live like the one that saved them, the one that is preeminent in all things. Paul has an interesting way of saying this at the end of this section.

He says:

...if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. -Colossians 1:23

He is not saying we will be saved if we live a good life. No, he is saying here that we will know, we will experience what it means to be reconciled to God. Here we will learn the fullness of Christ. He is telling us that in the living out of the gospel, in the living out of our salvation, we come to see the gospel in all its truth, we come to experience Jesus and all that he is. Yes, asking, "What would Jesus do?" is more than asking how we should conduct our lives each day and in each situation. It means we put on Christ. Our lives become wrapped up in his. We seek to follow him in all things, and here we experience salvation at its fullest possible extent. Now, this teaching is echoed across the New Testament. We hear it in Paul's longing to know the power of the resurrection in his life. That means in the way he lives his life he wants to experience the same power that raised Jesus from the dead. He wants his own dead life redeemed and restored. In our Flourish study we are learning that we can know Christ and not enjoy the fullness that is found in him. We can be ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of Christ. Paul again and again is yearning for a full participation in Christ in our lives. He calls this maturity in Christ.

Now, Sheldon wrote the book "In His Steps" in 1921. He was pushing the church to be like its head, Jesus. The title said it all. We are to be walking in his steps, walking and living as Jesus did. It is no good for us to be singing songs about Jesus being at the center of our lives when our lives are not centered on him. That is what Sheldon was placing before the church, the body of Christ, a hundred years ago. Now, the idea is not to produce guilt for all the ways we fall short. Paul isn't trying to do that. We live lives of grace. His point is to urge us to live fully the redeemed life that Jesus has provided to us.

Yes, as the hymn goes:

*'All for Jesus, all for Jesus,
All my being's ransomed powers,
All my thoughts, and all my doings,
All my days, and all my hours,'*

Let us pray:

Holy and gracious God, we too easily settle for ideas about Jesus rather than pursuing fullness in Christ. We go halfway and easily miss the flourishing life that you have for us in Jesus. Forgive us, O Lord, and lead us evermore to enjoy you and to rest in Christ for all things. In his name we pray. Amen.

Thursday, September 23

Now, this first chapter of Paul's letter includes the words of a hymn from the early church. It was a song about Jesus.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

¹⁶ For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. ¹⁷ And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. Colossians 1:15-18

Now on Sunday, we looked at the way this song puts forth the various ways that Jesus is the head. He is the first. He is preeminent. Now one of the difficulties of looking at Jesus, is that looking at him is like looking at the sun. The brilliance of who he is cannot be captured. I felt this when preparing for last week's message. As I explained, it is like trying to catch lightning. It flashes with such brilliance, but you cannot bottle it up. Jesus is living and active in our world. We are not talking about someone now confined to the pages of history. Jesus lives. I remember one of my professors from seminary explaining what it was like to write the history of Christianity in Asia. His work begins when some of the apostles went east with the gospel message. The book of Acts follows Paul and Silas as they crisscross the Roman world. But the apostle Thomas, the one we think of as doubting Thomas, went to India, and the church was planted and flourished there. My professor recorded the spread of the gospel there as on to China and Korea and Japan. I remember him explaining as he arrived in our modern times that it was easier to write about the dead than the living. He said this for two reasons. First, those living have not finished out their lives and ministries. And, second, those people, having read your book, could take issue with what you said about them.

Now, here's the thing about Jesus. He's still alive. As we read this section of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, we notice that Paul, as he speaks with the church about Jesus, mentions only two things from Jesus' earthly ministry. He speaks of the cross of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus. Why does he not retell the story of Jesus' life? I think for Paul, he knows Christ is alive and at work in the world then and there. He has no need or desire to rehash things Jesus did when he lived in Galilee. Christ is alive and working. I wonder how we think of Jesus. Do we think of Jesus' life confined to the years he spent in Israel? Or, do we know that Jesus is alive even now and working in our midst by his Spirit? Paul very much wanted to talk about the living Christ. He could see Jesus redeeming people, rescuing them from darkness and bringing them into the light. It is a very exciting thing when you come to relate to the Jesus that lives rather than the Jesus of the past. Now, this doesn't lessen what Jesus did during his earth ministry at all. But it keeps us looking for him to work in the here and now. Now, Paul uses this hymn from the early church to speak more about the eternal aspects of who Jesus is. We do always need to remember who Jesus is and what he has done. Yet, we can know and enjoy the living God here and now.

Now, that professor I mentioned was at one time a missionary in China. He tells of how he encountered Jesus at that time. One day, Chinese soldiers arrived at the mission office and arrested him. This was during the Chinese cultural revolution, and the government wanted to get missionaries out of the country. My professor was the treasurer for the mission agency, and the government claimed he had stolen money from the mission. Of course, the mission didn't have any money to be stolen. It was all a sham. He was put on trial, and the judge assigned to his case treated him very poorly and did not allow for a defense to be made. He seemed spiteful and determined to destroy him. The handwriting was on the wall, and my professor knew he would be convicted and sent off to jail. Indeed, he was convicted. But the surprise was that he was not sentenced to exile. The judge ordered that he be deported from the country. This was the lightest possible sentence and would actually help him get to freedom and safety. As he was being led by guards through the corridor to leave court, he saw the judge in the hallway. The judge gave him a simple gesture that let him know that he too was a Christian. Then my professor knew that the judge had to act harshly toward him so that he could ultimately set him free. He knew that, there in communist China, in the sham of a trial on false charges, Jesus had been with him all along.

Let's pray:

Forgive us, Father, for thinking that you used to be active in our world but that you have grown silent today. Remind us that you are always working to bring your kingdom here on earth as it is in

heaven. Help us to trust in you. We rejoice that Jesus is alive and we can know you through him. We pray together in his name. Amen.

Friday, September 24

Years ago, my parents invited Sandy and me to go with them on a cruise out of South Hampton, England. The cruise passed through ports in Ireland, Scotland and also France. In France our ship docked at La Havre, and we rented a car for the day and drove to Normandy. This was a deeply emotional day for us all. My dad served in WWII, yet he was spared from seeing combat. Our first stop was Omaha Beach. There is a monument marking the place where the D-Day landings happened all those years ago. From there we drove to the American Cemetery. The cemetery fills an immense section of the French countryside just above the beach. Likely, you have seen photographs, or have been there yourself. The grave markers lined up in rows seem to reach to the horizon. 9,387 Americans are buried in that sacred spot, the sign of the cost of freedom. Most of them died during that invasion in Normandy. While walking among the stones, you become aware of the magnitude of the sacrifice made to secure Europe and to free it from the tyranny that had the continent in its grip at the time. The cost was in American lives, families shattered to lose of their young men. Four young women died as well.

Now, as we read Colossians together, we may be surprised at the way God chose to redeem a people for himself:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²² he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him Colossians 1:21-22

Yes, God redeemed his people with the blood of the cross of Jesus. Here Paul uses the word “body of flesh” to capture the cost. Our redemption was purchased human life for human life. By a man in the body for all humanity that comes by faith in him.

Here is the Apostle Peter making this point in his letter:

...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. -1 Peter 1:18-19

Yes, it was with precious blood, the blood of the lamb of God, Jesus, that we were brought to life. At one time we were far away, but now we have been brought near by the blood of Jesus. Now, I think this is repeated in scripture again and again for a number of reasons. First, God wants us to see the magnitude of his love. He wants us to know to what extent he treasures his people, that he would send his Son on a rescue mission that would cost him his life. I think we struggle to understand how much we are loved by God. I think this is what the prodigal son thought when he was far from home. He had dishonored his father and wasted what his father had spent a lifetime building. He expected to return home and to earn his father’s forgiveness by working alongside the family servants. He had no idea that his father would run to him and embrace him. The young man had done nothing to deserve this love. He had not recovered what he had lost or done a thing to restore what he had taken. No, the father loved him more than that. We must come to learn that the Father loves us beyond the weight of our sin and shame. Seeing Jesus giving up his life for us is like walking the cemetery in Normandy...except we know at the cross, the one that made our world and sustains all things laid down his life out of love for the Father and for us. There is another truth to be learned. It is the value of life. The Romans used the cross as a way to devalue life. They wantonly took the lives of people that opposed them. They put people in their place, and people became the fuel that kept their empire running. If you were in the way, they ran over you. They piled up bodies to establish their kingdom. It was a kingdom of force and destruction. But surprisingly, at the cross, life was given the value God intended from the beginning. Here was God himself erecting a monument to his love and to the value of human beings. He did this in the very place where the Romans did the opposite. As a result, Christians valued everyone. Rich and poor. Slave and free. Babies and adults. The weak and the strong. The whole and the broken. The cross created a revolution in the valuing of human life. We have a way of valuing things and people in our world. We treasure gold and silver, but we are told that these are the things that perish. They will not last in the eternal kingdom of God. But, people, that is another story. Jesus and his blood, that is another story entirely. So, here at the

cross where we see the blood of Jesus the Son of God; we get a lesson in cost and love and value, one that changes our world. One that puts our own lives in a completely new light.

Let's pray:

Lord God, remind me today, as I see the people around me, that you made each of us in your image, and that you have set your affection on humankind. You made us a little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honor. Remind us also of your love that we might not forget who we are and that we are yours. For we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Saturday, September 25

Last fall in our Thankful series I told a story related by Pastor Rod Rosenblatt. It seems a man fell overboard during his Caribbean cruise. It wasn't easy, but the ship managed to turn around to rescue the man. Clearly, the man could not swim well enough to save himself. A rescue ring life preserver was thrown overboard to him, attached to a rope, to save him. When the man was safely on board, he remarked to the watching crowd: "Did you see the way I grabbed that life ring? Did you see how well I held on and saved myself? There has to be some award for that. I must be some kind of hero." Ok. We should laugh. Here was the man that managed to endanger his life by going overboard, and the ship had to turn around and rescue him. But he has made himself the hero because he held the life preserver. It's a silly story. I retell the story because in this section of Colossians we are not mentioned in any active way until the end.

Our first verses tell us:

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. -Colossians 1:13-14

Yes, Paul starts with the message of grace. God rescued us. Jesus' coming was a rescue campaign that depended completely on him. It requires nothing of us. We are delivered. We are rescued. We are not the operators, the rescuers, but the rescuees, you would say. We didn't affect our own rescue and save ourselves. We did not even reach out and grab the life ring. We were overboard, unconscious and dead. Jesus rescued us, and restored us to life. He got us breathing and got our hearts beating again.

As we saw yesterday:

... And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death... -Colossians 1:21

So, these statements of our rescue are the bookends on either side of this description of the identity of our rescuer. That would be the question we would ask, is it not? If someone rescued you and saved your life, you would want to know who did it and why they did it. This is especially true if that person lost their life saving your own. This is why Paul tells us. This is God in human flesh. He did this to end the alienation between us and the God that made us and loves us. I remember years ago, shortly after I returned to Miami, I bumped into the father of a friend from high school. He had just received a heart transplant. He explained that he now had a Cuban heart. The man that died, his organ donor, was Cuban. Think about that. You would want to know the man that rescued you, the person that saved your life. Perhaps, you have seen the stories of transplant recipients that have met the family members of the one whose organ they received. These are powerful moments, moments of deep gratitude. As we learned yesterday, there is the realization of the cost. They lost a family member they dearly loved, and now you have a new lease on life. This is the grace we have received. Now, we look at this today because we always want to find a way to pay for what is given freely, to try and earn the gift. We want to prove ourselves worthy of it all. We want to compensate for what was given. Paul never tells us to do this. Instead, he tells us that our response is to live fully in what we have been given. We continue to see that it is all of grace, all God's gift. Yes, we used to be alienated from God. Now, we have fellowship with God. Before we were building our own identity on the foundation of our own actions or own successes. Now, we build on a foundation that cannot be shaken. We know we are children of God, loved by him. We don't seek to pay God back, for we know we could never do that, no more than my friend could make up for the loss that provided him with his new heart. The end result, instead, is that we know who we really are, and we

come to live the life God intended we would live, filled with his mercy and grace. Yes, of course, we live grateful.

Paul repeats those words through this letter.

...to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; ¹¹ being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. -Colossians 1:10-12

We don't walk worthy of it all as a repayment plan, but as a life of fully entering into what God has given us. It is all glorifying God and enjoying him. It is all gratitude.

Let's pray:

Abba Father, we find it difficult to understand your grace. We live in a world of earning and deserving, and we know we do not deserve the love you have given to us. We don't deserve your goodness of the life we have in Christ. Let our lives, we pray, show forth the joy and gratitude that demonstrates we understand it is all of grace. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.