

FLOURISH - Week 3

Monday, September 26

Years ago, when I was a much younger pastor than I am right now, every other week I would visit in the home of a family in the church I was serving. I would do this because the parents of the woman that lived there lived with her. Her father and mother occupied a suite at the back of the house. They were both elderly, and the mom's mom had long before plunged into a deep dementia. But her husband, ever faithful, took care of her, tenderly attending to her needs. I saw in this man a love that was the very expression of the marriage vow, "in sickness and in health." He not only cared for his aging wife, but he did so with joy and tenderness, grace and deep love. His love for his wife became for me a signpost pointing to Jesus himself and his faithful love for us through every season of our lives.

Now, here is our text from Colossians today:

Colossians 1:24-25

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,²⁵ 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...

Paul, writing this letter to the church in Colossae, explains his own sufferings. As we have learned, this is one of Paul's prison letters. He was put in prison because of his open declaration of Jesus across the Greco-Roman world. Notice how he speaks of this. He says he is filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Now, that has always been a strange and disturbing statement. Is Paul saying that somehow Jesus' suffering was incomplete at the cross, or that somehow Jesus' life did not fill up the sufferings that brought about our salvation? I thought what Jesus did was enough, that it is completely sufficient for our salvation. You are right. Jesus completely filled up the cup over suffering to the fullest possible extent. Paul isn't saying that anything needs to be added to that. I believe he is saying two things. First, he is saying that wherever the church is coming to be and growing to, there will be a sacred suffering. We learned this from the life of Moses. While God set Israel free, Moses learned there was a cost to lead the people to live free in their covenant with the Lord. He would have sleepless nights. He would experience the grief of seeing the people wander from the Lord. He would often fall before the Lord on his face, pleading the case of the people. Moses suffered for the people because he loved them. Real love, not love as an idea, always involves a sacred suffering. If you love your spouse, you're going to hurt when you see that person sick, when you see your spouse struggling or hurting. You will be suffering over the one you love. This is the story of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. He loved people and suffered out of love for them, out of love for us. Parents, if you love your child, you will suffer grief when if they fall, when they struggle, when they fail. It will happen. Love gives birth to this sacred suffering. This is what Paul says he has for the church. He desires them to steer away from the things that distract them from Jesus. He desires that they reach maturity. He carries the burden of loving them. This sacred suffering, this burden, is a key trait of love in our broken world. But how does Paul fill up the sufferings of Christ? That's the second thing. He does that in two ways. By suffering for the sake of the gospel, he has drawn the attention of the persecutors, the people that would oppose the new believers, to himself and away from them. Because Paul is in prison, they feel they have won a victory, and the battle is over. The good news is that the church is protected.

There is one final way. I saw this in the man that I mentioned who was taking care of his wife. His suffering to serve and care for his wife made the gospel visible. Yes, I knew Jesus, but here was the love of Jesus in living color, in this man laying down his life for his wife, tenderly caring for her. My visits with him and his wife every other week became lessons in love, holy encounters with the living God revealed in flesh and blood. This sounds like Jesus. Here's what the church in Colossae sees with Paul. He is in prison. His life is in danger. His future is in question. He is thinking of them. He is writing to them. He is loving them to the end, in the midst of suffering. Yes, it is a sacred suffering that Paul endures, not because the suffering of Jesus somehow fell short, but because the suffering of Jesus changed him and enabled him to love far beyond his own abilities to do so. The sufferings of Jesus could then be seen and known through the sufferings of Paul.

Love is a scary thing. I understand why some people run from it, and want nothing to do with it. This is because it costs. It always costs. God knows this better than we do. Yet, he has chosen to love us in Christ.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we run from love because we are afraid if we give our heart to anyone or anything, we're going to be hurt. It's true, Lord. But you show us that there is no real life without love and without sacrifice. Show us Jesus this week, when we turn away from the cost of loving. Remind us of the cross and how much you love us. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Tuesday, September 28

Years ago, I came into a large antiquarian library. It was a gift of God during a time when I needed resources to support my family. When we first moved to Miami, Sandy and I made the decision that the best place for our kids would be a local Christian school. The tuition was high even though we were able to get some financial aid. Though we made the commitment, honestly, we could not afford it. I prayed about this, asking God to provide what was needed. God did this year in and year out, often in ways that I did not expect. Early on, I was invited by a friend that co-owned an area moving and storage company. They were having an auction to cover the bills of people that had failed to pay their storage bills. I went to the auction and found a number of containers with antiquarian books. This is how, for a season, I became a seller of old books. Our need for resources was met, and I also learned a new business. In all of this God provided for my family. One major lesson I learned in this business was that we may think we are owners, but really, we are stewards. One day I held a book covered in vellum, animal skin, that had been printed in the 1550s. That was over 450 years ago. Think of the number of people that have owned that book. Some of the books in the collection had a provenance. That means there was a record of the various people in whose library that particular volume had rested for a season.

Now, scripture uses a word that we rarely hear to describe this kind of relationship. It is stewardship. In Greek, the word is related to the word for "house" because stewards were managers of households. The house wasn't theirs, but it was theirs to take care of.

Here's our text for today:

Colossians 1:25-26

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, ²⁶the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

Here is Paul describing his calling. He does not own the church or the ministry or the gospel. Instead, God has made him a steward, giving him the opportunity to care for and build the ministry during his lifetime. Paul would build the church, and then the day would come when he would pass on the ministry of the gospel to others. This is a principle we learned in our Numbers study and in the ministry of Moses and Aaron.

Now, here's the thing about being a steward. Stewards in the ancient world held a high office. A steward was entrusted with the household of the master. He took care of things, used the resources of the master. He was trusted by the master with what was his. All that the steward did was for the sake of the master. To call us God's stewards, which is what we also are called, is a statement of trust and responsibility. God has entrusted his household to Paul and also to us as well. In our text for today, the idea is that God entrusted Paul with the truth of the gospel to share with others in all its fullness. Paul certainly feels the burden and significance of this calling. When pastors, elders or deacons become ordained to office, you will see a service with a laying on of hands. Other elders will come forward and lay their hands on the person being ordained, and they will pray over that person. Years ago, a friend of mine traced back the laying on of hands generation by generation all the way from today to the reformation, to the ministries of Martin Luther and John Calvin and others. He traced how the baton of stewardship passed from one generation to another, from one leader to another. Think of the generations that have carried forth the stewardship of the gospel after the apostle Paul. We know that Paul discipled Epaphras, the one that started the church in Colossae.

Paul also laid hands on Timothy, the young man he trained to become pastor in Ephesus. The stewardship of the gospel and the churches was always being passed on to others. We stand as one among the generations as stewards of the gospel. Our mission is to share it faithfully in our time, and to live it faithfully in our community and also to train others to do that same.

Here is Paul instructing Timothy to do that:

You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. ³ Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.

-2 Timothy 2:1-3

Now, I was a steward of the antiquarian books. Most of them I have gotten into the hands of others. Some went to libraries. They are being passed forward to others that will hold on to them for a time and then leave them to still others. As I think of being a steward of the mysteries of God in the gospel, I want to make sure we deliver the faith on to the next generation well.

Let's pray:

Faithful Father, you have given us a high and noble calling to be stewards of the gospel. Provide us with your wisdom and your power to fulfill our calling. We are amazed that you have entrusted your work into our hands, but we know that while we plant and water, only you can make things grow. Help us to trust in you for the growth and the future of your church. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Wednesday, September 29

I remember years ago being in Haiti, with one of our Granada mission teams, and walking by the home of a person that was a shaman. Above the house was raised a flagpole with colorful flags that I was told represented the spirits this person was in contact with. People would show up seeking healing for themselves or a relative, or success in business or desiring to put a curse on someone. They would pay the required money, and their wish would be granted. The Haitians driving us across the country did not doubt for a moment that these people have real spiritual power. They tell stories of things that have happened as a result of the actions of these individuals.

Now, in our country we don't hold these animistic religious beliefs. Many people have given up traditional faith as well. But we still see, dialed into people's hearts, a spiritual sensitivity. Studies show people that no longer believe in God or heaven or hell, believe in UFOs and angels. Their hearts continue to be drawn to awe and wonder in life. It is as if they know that spiritual things are real. The heart longing is still there, and the belief system is not missing. Scripture teaches us that everyone is drawn to mystery and wonder. We know that some things are holy or set apart.

Now, when the letter of Colossians was written the world was deeply religious and spiritual. There were the gods of Greece and Rome almost everywhere. Each city had a patron deity and a temple. But there were also the mystery religions. These were faiths with secret rites and rituals, sacrifices and sayings. Actually, that is the way the word mystery was used in their world.

Now, today our text uses the word mystery:

Colossians 1:26-27

...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. ²⁷ 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.

Now at the time Paul wrote this letter, there were many mystery cults. These cults promised connection with a god through sacred actions or rites of worship. These sacred rites were not open to just anyone. A person had to go through an elaborate initiation process to prepare them and also to prove they were worthy of being part of the cult. If they did not do this, they were not allowed in the secret meetings, nor could they know about what happened in those meetings. These cults offered people salvation through a connection with the cosmic world. You would have the chance to participate in the life and fate of the gods. In our section for this week, Paul uses the same word for

mystery uses by the pagans and applies it to Jesus and what God has done through him. He is specifically using the language of pagan religion to show us just how different everything that God has done in His Son Jesus is. He begins in a place the pagans would understand. God's plan was hidden for ages, and we could not see what he had planned to do through Jesus. But now you would call the gospel God's open secret. How radical is that. Jesus shows us that the way to fellowship with the true and living God isn't through sacred rituals, but through the death of the Son of God. This secret is not under wraps. It not there for his people to see clearly and to share fully. Christians didn't meet in secret setting conducting rituals that promised to unlock the hidden mystery of God. No, God came in person through Jesus. He revealed the new and living way to God through his body at the cross. Everything in the language of the mystery cults was turned upside down. We don't go through elaborate rituals to draw near to God. No, God has come to us. There is no elaborate initiation into the knowledge of God. The knowledge of God is given fully in Jesus. It is all of grace. That's the thing we were looking at before. While people today have largely turned away from faith in Christ, there is this deep spiritual hunger that cannot be denied. One scholar calls it our God ache. We were made for God, and when we are apart, our spiritual hunger grows and produces loneliness and depression, anxiety and fear. This happens because we were made for fellowship with God. We were made to know God. In Christ, God not only comes to us, but he also adopts us into his family, making us his own beloved children and providing for us an intimacy with him and an inheritance in him. The truth is that our spiritual longings are only fully met in him.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we go seeking for you anywhere, but we cannot find you on our own. You must seek us out and find us. We thank you that you have done so in Christ. Thank you for the open secret of the gospel and for the mystery revealed fully in Jesus. Help us today to live in the joy of being yours. In your name, we pray. Amen.

Thursday, September 30

I think Paul Tripp has it right. He says:

Admit it. You're a glory junkie. That's why you like the 360, between-the legs, slam dunk, or that amazing hand-beaded formal gown, or the seven layer triple-chocolate mousse cake. It's why you're attracted to the hugeness of the mountain range or the multihued splendor of the sunset. You were hardwired by your Creator for a glory orientation. It is inescapable. It's in your genes.

Yes, as Tripp says, we seek glory. But what is glory? That word for glory means weight, value, significance. What scripture teaches is that we are pursuers. We pursue value and place, significance in our world. You could say we crave it. This is why the athlete goes through years of training to be able to represent his or her nation at the Olympics. It is why so much is invested in gaining a medal. It is not for the medal. It is all for glory. The medal means glory. This sense of value is what that business woman feels when she gets her c-suite job. What the man feels when he is nominated for the Nobel prize. Even the hungering for power serves our desire for glory. In our world we don't hear much said about glory. We often call it ambition. It can be seen in our longing to get to the top, to win, to succeed. It is why we avoid failure at all costs. We want glory. We want to know that we matter. Our lives matter. Yes, you could call it mattering in our world. We are doing all we can pursuing mattering, value. Glory. How can we see this? Look at your trophy case. Look at your photo gallery. Look at what you would brag about, if you were to brag. What are you most proud of? What do you feel you have worked hardest to achieve? What would you say reveals the serious person you are? We hunger for recognition. We go out to see how many likes or views we have. The biographer for popular actress Marlene Dietrich explained that she issued recordings of the ovations she received when she performed. She would replay them back for herself and bask in the applause. When friends visited her at her home, she would play them and say, "That was Rio," "That was Cologne. That was Chicago."

Now, here is the problem with the glory we build for ourselves. First, it doesn't full satisfy. We always seem to need or want more of it. We just can get enough. Second, it is fleeting. It quickly fades as time passes, and so we must exert an immense amount of energy to keep it going. Once we have climbed one mountain, we need a higher and greater one. We always must be in the chase pursuing a greater glory, another Olympic medal, another promotion, winning another major case or closing a

great deal. These pursuits become the fuel that drives our lives. But again, they are never enough. They don't last long enough.

Now, here's our text for today:

Colossians 1:27

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.

You see, the gospel says we are living in a glory story. God has all glory in himself, but we chose to seek glory in other things, things part of the creation. Though we knew God, we didn't glorify him as God. Instead, we sought our own glory. But if we live long enough, we'll learn this is a fools errand. We can never get to the sense of value, the meaning and significance that we desire. Paul says that, in Christ, we have the hope of real glory, the hope of true connection to God and his kingdom where real glory, ultimate value is to be found. Yes, glory is not something we can secure for ourselves. Glory is found in Christ, the one that values us and gives us a place with the Father. Here is the hope for what truly lasts, that which eternally satisfies, that which we can add nothing to, that which we can take nothing from. You see, the question isn't whether we will pursue glory. All of us do that. The question is where will we seek it? Where will we find it? Will we settle for alternate glories that do not satisfy, or will we find our hunger for glory met in Christ, the king of glory?

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. -John 1:14

Yes, talk about the weight of glory. There is no one like Jesus. He came into our world, God in human flesh. Yet, there was no pride. He was ambitious, but he was motivated for the glory of God. Jesus...

...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. -Philippians 2:6-8

So, the Father exalted him, giving him a glory beyond all others. Paul says that it is in Christ that we have the hope of glory. In him, we can have real value and significance, we can matter in a world that is passing away.

Let's pray:

Lord God, you know the way our hearts work. We are chasers, chasing life. But like the dog chasing his tail, we can never catch true glory. We find what we chase is always passing away. It always runs out. Thank you for giving us a place in your family, a place in the great story you are writing each day about our world. Thank you for making us yours. Help us to pursue your glory above all things. For the praise of your name. Amen.

Friday, October 1

Years ago, when Sandy and I were part of a new church plant, a new man visited for worship one Sunday. At the time our little fledgling congregation was meeting in a rented hall, a city recreation building. There were pool tables on the side of the room in the location where I would have to stand to share the gospel. The building looked nothing like a church building, a place where Christians might congregate for worship. After the service, this man approached me and ask, "Is this a cult?" Now, when he asked that I thought, if we were cult, would I tell him: "Yes, we are a cult, and we are trying to draw you into our net"? Of course, not. If we were a cult, we would think we were the real thing. I told that man we were Presbyterians. Maybe, he'd think that was worse than being a cult. I also pointed out that no cult would admit they were one. But he should check us out for himself.

Now, Paul is writing the church in Colossae, and in the empire at that time there were a multitude of many cults and religions being practiced. The religious diversity was far greater than what we experience. In the midst of this environment, Paul knows that the new believers are in constant danger.

He says to them in Colossians 2:4-5:

I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ 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.

Paul can't visit with them. He doesn't have the ability to deal with challenges to their faith in Christ as they come up. But, he will in his letter, deal with what he has heard is threatening them. Suffice it to say, at this point, he knows they are under attack. As baby Christians, recent believers in Jesus, he knows they are vulnerable to being drawn into cults in their community. They are at risk, you could say. This is true at every moment in time. In the last hundred years, scores of offshoots have grown from the life of the gospel. Many of them have been unhealthy distractions from the truth of the gospel. Some have tacked toward the right toward legalism, taking more and more emphasis of the gospel on living a moral life to please God. They have added to the gospel, rules never meant to be part of faith in Christ. On the other side, some groups have denied the truth of scripture or the bodily resurrection of Jesus. You may hear from these quarters much about social justice, but little about the cross of Jesus and what he has done for us. Others replace the way of grace with a political philosophy or a new program of social reform. Paul says that the church can be deluded with plausible arguments and thereby be distracted from Jesus and the truth of the gospel. That leaves us with this question: how can we know who is speaking the truth?

The apostle John wrote the church in Ephesus with the same concerns. He said:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. -1 John 4:1-3

Yes, he says that we must test the spirits, listen to the message we are hearing and consider this. Do they believe Jesus is God come to us in human flesh? Do they believe the message about who Jesus is and what he has done for us at the cross? That is the key. It is easy to drift from the gospel towards other beliefs. Paul told the Galatians that if you add anything to the gospel, you don't have a watered-down gospel. You have no gospel at all. It is as simple as that. And, if even an angel in heaven appears to you and shares with you another message, you are to reject it. There is no other message from God. The gospel is not the preface to the book. It is the whole story from A to Z. So, as we read Paul's letter to Colossae, we can see he would love to visit them, to give them solid teaching and help them to remain focused on Christ. But he can't, so that is why he is writing this letter. Along the way, we will see that he asks the believers in Colossae to pass his letter along to the church in Laodicea. He has the same concerns for this group of believers as well.

Now, this is where we are. We need to be careful of what you might call "Christ and." Christ and your politics. Christ and your club. Christ and your own beliefs about where the world is going. There is no "Christ and." There is only Christ. Only he can save us. Only he reveals to us who God is. Only he can show us the blueprint for human life. Only he can provide us with forgiveness and the love and welcome of God. Only he can fully calm our anxious hearts and give us true rest. Only he can give us life.

Let's pray:

Lord God, we are swimming in a vast sea of ideas and beliefs. Give us clarity to see Jesus. Remind us each day to look to him. Let us yoke our lives to him that we might find rest for our souls. In his name we pray. Amen.

Saturday, October 2

One of the journeys I began last year (and I try to do so every few years) was to rediscover my calling. I believe that God plans for us not so much a career, but a calling, something that he plans for us to do to share in his mission in the world. God made us and invites us to join him in his work. Your calling may be mentoring college students, or raising children, or communicating the gospel

through teaching. Your calling may be raising resources to support missionaries or writing music to the glory of God. Your calling may not be, and often isn't, your job, the thing that pays the bills. But it is something God designed you to do. God made you for himself, but he also made you for this as well. Now, a summer ago, during the first summer of the pandemic, I began working through a book resource to help me refocus on my calling. How can you know your calling? It often flows from abilities you have, passions that drive you, experiences you have gathered along the way, combined with your temperament. Discovering your calling is not like trying to read tea leaves. Instead, it is looking at who God is, how God made you, and where God has placed you. These are the three major ingredients that come together to help you see what your calling is. Now, in our text we hear about Paul's calling. He explains that his calling is to present everyone mature in Christ. He believes that God has called him to form disciples of Jesus that grow in the gospel so they will live out of the fullness of Jesus.

He says in Colossians 1:29:

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

Now, it is true that Paul had another job as a tent-maker. Though he was sharing the gospel, he also managed to hold down a side job. That was not his life, but it provided for his needs and opened the door for him to serve. Then God uniquely prepared Paul for his calling. First, Paul knew the scriptures. He was taught by one of the most respected rabbis of the time. He knew the ropes in Jerusalem and served at one of the highest levels of power. He knew the way the world worked. But there was more. God gave him a passion for Gentiles, for the nations, that they might know the messiah, Jesus, and come to faith in him. Everything about Paul opened the door for him to become a disciple of Jesus, someone that would travel the empire to make Christ known. Now, as we read this about Paul, it really is extraordinary. Here's why. Paul had once been on the other side of the fence, opposing Christ and persecuting the first Christians. Yes, his was a remarkable conversion story. What a change he endured! One of the Christian leaders heard that Paul's heart had been changed by Jesus, and the Lord has told Ananias to go and retrieve Paul. But he didn't want to get close to Paul.

But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. ¹⁴ And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." ¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel." -Acts 9:13-15

Yes, the Lord has a plan for Paul. It's a remarkable story. So is your own. In the gospel, God restores us to fellowship with him and then calls us alongside himself for the sake of his kingdom here on earth. Indeed, the Lord calls us as his co-workers, those that join him in his work in the world. No, this may not seem true for you. You may have a job that doesn't seem important. But remember, Paul made tents. Yes, he was gifted and well taught, but everything he did came from God. It is here where we see what the gospel, God's love for us in Christ, does in each one of us. We are brought home to God. We are forgiven for our sins. The things that stood in the way of us serving God, walking with God, have all been nailed to the cross of Jesus. Yes, this is part of the flourishing life we have been learning about. In Christ, we are brought to the place where we come to partner with the living God. Notice Paul does this with the energy that God powerfully works in him. God doesn't ask Paul to do anything he will not provide him the power to accomplish. No, it is a partnership in God's own kingdom. As we discovered, this is why God works in this way. He doesn't need us to accomplish his purposes. No, he wants us with him. This is where we come to know his mighty power, and trust in his ways, and experience his presence, and know his joy.

Let's pray:

All-powerful God, we imagine that we are doing something for you. Remind us that you call us to serve with you. Thank you that the power and purpose come from you. Reveal to us the calling you have for each of us that we might see what you have for us in Christ. Thank you for connecting us to your purpose in redeeming the world. In your name, we pray. Amen.