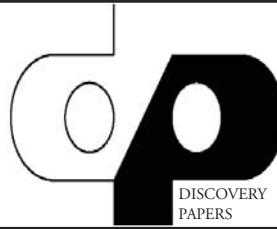


WAITING IN LOVE FOR CHRIST

SERIES: WAITING FOR CHRIST



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Colossians 1:24-2:5
4th Message
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What do you love?

Today is the last Sunday of Advent and the theme we are talking about is love. Love is one of the easiest things in our culture to sentimentalize. It is such a common idea that it's easy for it to lose all real meaning. As we've been thinking through these Advent themes, we've been recognizing that these words sometimes mean something different to our culture than what they mean to us as the church.

We've also been recognizing that Advent is a time of waiting. We are waiting for the coming of Christ. I've been reminding us that Advent is not so much about the coming that already came, it is about the coming that is yet to come. So we're thinking about waiting in love. But what does waiting have to do with love? Some of our themes during Advent have seemed to be completely opposed to waiting. Like waiting in joy. Waiting and love don't really seem to be related either. How do we talk about them together?

To answer that, we are looking at Colossians 1:24-2:5. This wraps up our Advent series in Colossians. This passage is the end of Paul's introduction to his letter. He introduced the cosmic themes, now he gets personal as he talked about himself and the Colossians as a community.

There are three main themes that he addressed in this passage. He talked a lot about suffering—mostly his own suffering. He talked about how much he wanted the Colossians to really know this Christ he was discussing. Finally, he talked about love. One of his primary goals for the Colossian church was that they love each other. Suffering. Knowing Christ. Love. As we look at this passage, we're going to follow these themes and see how Paul connects them in different ways.

To help us see that, I'm going to start by introducing a phrase that summarizes the main challenge that this passage offers us: **Suffer in love to know Christ.**

These are the three main ideas and this is how I'm

suggesting they go together. The whole passage is what I would call a “circling the drain” kind of passage. Paul didn't move in a straight line through these ideas. He moved in a circle, touching on each of these ideas and then he came back again to say more. We learn more about how they relate as we move through the passage. Finally, they swirl faster together and at the end, come together with a slurp. If we've been following the argument well, everything makes sense at the end.

So we're going to take this phrase and work our way through it this morning. We'll try to understand what Paul meant by suffering. What kind of love was he talking about? How do we know Christ? And we'll talk about how each of these ideas fit together. My hope is that by the time we get to the end, we'll see how all these parts connect in a beautiful and powerful way. Hopefully we'll hear that satisfying gurgle as everything comes together at the drain.

Suffering

This passage can be roughly broken down into two sections, so we'll start by looking at the first section.

Colossians 1:24-29:

²⁴Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. ²⁵I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—²⁶the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

²⁸We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we

may present everyone perfect in Christ. ²⁹To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.

First, Paul talked about the suffering that he endured for the Colossians. When he said “what was suffered for you,” he referred to the pain he endured for the sake of the Colossians. Our translation doesn’t make that immediately clear. Incidentally, the 2010 update to the NIV does clear that up, along with some of the things we talked about last week where the 1984 NIV didn’t translate things as well as it might have. Paul essentially said that he was happy for what he had endured for the Colossians.

But then he said one of the most confusing things about suffering in the Bible. What he suffered somehow made up for what Christ’s afflictions lacked. What did he mean by that? What could be lacking in Christ’s afflictions? Wasn’t his death on the cross sufficient to reconcile us to God? Yes, it was: just last week we saw that God reconciled us by making peace through the blood of Christ. In fact, the word he used here for “afflictions” was never used to refer to Christ’s suffering on the cross. So it must be a different kind of suffering.

It helps to understand a concept that was common in first century Judaism. When people talked about the Messiah saving them, they often talked about the suffering he would have to endure. They called this the “Messianic woes.” The idea is that the Messiah would have to endure a certain amount of suffering until it was all gone, right up to the point that he brings in the new kingdom of God. These Jews didn’t know that the coming of the Messiah would be a two-step process. But they believed that the end times would be filled with the “woes of the Messiah” until they were complete and God’s kingdom could be ushered in.

These were probably the afflictions that Paul referred to. Christ’s suffering on the cross fulfills everything necessary for redemption, but in some sense he still suffers until his kingdom is completely realized. What is lacking is that there is still more to suffer until the final redemption. Paul said that he shared in that suffering. He said that he “fills up in his flesh” those afflictions “for the sake of [Christ’s] body.” The words he used for flesh and body are synonyms. Paul shared in them because he was part of Christ’s body. If Christ is suffering, his body is suffering. Paul was part of that body, therefore he suffered on behalf of that body.

Has your back ever hurt? Maybe you pulled a muscle, maybe you twisted it the wrong way, or maybe you have chronic back pain. The thing about pain in your body is that it is never isolated to one spot. Our nervous system is like an interconnected system of wires that runs throughout our body, connecting everything through our spinal cord to our brain. So when our back is hurt, sometimes we feel pain in our legs, feet, or fingertips. Sometimes it causes a headache. Sometimes we can even feel nauseated. The point is that suffering somewhere gets experienced everywhere.

Paul was saying that he was suffering because part of the role of Christ’s body during this season is to suffer. One scholar, N.T. Wright, puts it this way. Paul “understands the vocation of the church as being to suffer.” However, he says, “the church has forgotten how to apply to itself the fact that it is the body of the crucified Messiah.”¹

Did you know this was part of the job description of the church? That part of our role is to suffer? We’re going to find out more about what this looks like in a few minutes, but this is what we do until Christ returns. Paul went on to talk a little bit more about what those sufferings were all about.

Suffering to know Christ

In verse 25, Paul said that he was given a divine task to “proclaim the word of God” to the Colossians. The original phrase is even stronger. He said he was tasked with “completing” or “fulfilling” the word of God. Part of that task was writing them the letter that we have in our hands. That’s how he suffered.

Later in verse 28, he said that he labored toward the end that people may know Christ. Again at the beginning of the next section, he talked about the great struggle he had for the Colossians. At least part of the suffering that Paul talked about was the suffering of his pastoral and apostolic concern for them. This makes me think of a professor of mine at seminary who always referred to pastors he respected as “laboring faithfully for the gospel.” Not “building a huge church” or “writing great books,” but “laboring faithfully for the gospel.” In my better moments that is what I aspire to.

It’s not surprising for me that Paul wrote about his

pastoral and apostolic effort to the Colossians as suffering. I thought about titling this sermon, “How much we, as pastors, suffer for you” but that didn’t feel quite right. But being a pastor does involve suffering. Coming alongside others in their pain. Taking their pain on yourself. Being concerned for others’ spiritual health. Watching people you love struggle or make bad decisions.

The reason I couldn’t quite use that title for this sermon is because at PBC, we recognize that we are all responsible for ministering to each other. This kind of suffering isn’t limited to those of us who are financially supported by the church. We all do it on some level.

I find it encouraging that Paul referred to it as suffering. He was being honest. This caring for each other isn’t supposed to be easy. We can see that Paul’s goal was for people to know Christ. He saw his role as a spiritual matchmaker, as he introduced people to Christ in the midst of their circumstances.

There’s a fairly recent Robin Williams movie called “License to Wed” about a couple who gets pre-marital counseling from their priest. I didn’t see the movie because it didn’t look all that great, but I remember a scene from the previews where the priest is in bed between the man and the woman. Priests stand in between people and God.

But Paul didn’t see his role as standing between people and Christ. Matchmakers get out of the way. Sometimes we suffer too much for each other because we think we are responsible to solve each other’s problems; to be God for each other. But we can’t, we’re in this together, laboring for each other to know Christ. We’re matchmakers. Not priests.

I found this to be such a helpful reminder to myself as a pastor that I printed out verses 28-29 and hung them in my office. I want to remember that my role is to proclaim Christ and I do it with the energy of God working within me.

Know Christ

If we’re to really understand this, we need to know what Paul meant by knowing Christ. What does this look like? Paul said that Christ is a mystery. Yet, he wanted the

Colossians to know Him. He used the word “mystery” three times in this passage. He said it was a mystery that had been hidden for a long time. Everyone wanted to understand it, but no one could. In his first letter, Peter says that “even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:12).

Secrets are powerful things, aren’t they? I play this game with my kids sometimes where I’ll call them over and tell them to come to me because I have a secret to tell them. I tell them it’s a very important secret that they really want to know. They’ve played this game enough times with me to know that the secret is usually some form of the word, “tickle” and it results in me tickling them until they beg me to stop. So they know this and whenever I start talking like this, they’ll say to each other, “don’t go—he’s just going to tickle you.” But they come anyway. They walk slowly toward me, kind of giggling, knowing that they’re walking right into a trap, but they can’t avoid it because the promise of knowing a secret is just too great.

We love secrets. We love to know things that no one else knows. Paul said that Christ is a secret that has been revealed. For thousands of years, people have wanted to understand God’s purposes in the world. Even angels wanted to get a grasp of it and now we can. So what’s the secret?

He used this beautiful phrase to describe it: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Union with Christ and the expectation of something coming. The word used for mystery here is most frequently used to refer to what is going to happen during the end of the world. Everybody always wants to know the future. That’s what we’re remembering during this time of Advent. We can live our lives toward the end. We hope for glory. More than we can imagine. That’s where we are headed.

While we wait, Christ is in us. In verse 29, Paul said that his goal was to present everyone “complete,” “mature,” or “perfect” in Christ. So Christ is in us and we are in Christ. We are one with him. Kind of sounds like a mystery, doesn’t it?

It reminds us of the way Jesus prayed just before his death. In John 17, Jesus prayed to the Father and asked “May they also be in us,” then asked that he would be in them and the Father would be in him. “I in them” and “them in us.” All of this speaks of some type of union with Christ. If you put your faith in him, you are one with him.

He is in you. You are in him.

This is a mystery, but it is available to everyone. It's cosmic, supernatural, beautiful, and it's been revealed. The false teachers in Colosse talked about mystery a lot as well. Mystery was a big part of the pagan cults of the day as well as Jewish mysticism. But the mystery that these guys talked about was only available to a select few. You had to be in the "in crowd" in order to have access to their mystery. It was secret knowledge. You attained to more and more of the mystery as you progressed up their spiritual ladder.

But God revealed this mystery among the Gentiles. Everyone has access. This combination of a mystery that can be known is one of the paradoxes in the Christian faith that we need to hold in tension. Sometimes people think that we know everything about God. That's saying way too much. I always say that if I completely understand it, it can't be God. Then other times we think that we can't really know anything about God, but that's wrong too. This mystery has been revealed. It's still a mystery, but we can know it. Whenever we try to resolve this tension, we make mistakes. Knowing Christ is a mystery and has been revealed.

Love

So in this first section, Paul talked a lot about how he suffered for the sake of the Colossians. He worked hard in order that they may know Christ. This was his passion, his burden, and his calling. We have seen that we can learn from his example as we suffer with the goal of knowing Christ. In the next five verses, he said a little more about his specific goal for the Colossians and how it was related to knowing Christ.

Colossians 2:1-5:

¹I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. ²My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all

the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

Paul explained why he worked so hard. He said that his purpose was that these Colossians might be "encouraged in heart and united in love." He wanted them to love each other. This was his goal.

It's interesting to note in the New Testament whom we are supposed to love. We tend to talk and think about loving the world a lot and that's a good thing. I don't want to downplay the importance of that at all, but most of the commands about love in the New Testament focus on loving each other within the community of faith. The witness of the New Testament churches was that they cared for each other.

Nolan Sharp, Campus Crusade for Christ Missionary in Croatia, mentioned this when he preached here several weeks ago during our missions conference. He pointed out that what made the Christians in the first century different was that they cared for each other. They sacrificed for each other, cared for their sick, their elderly, and the poor among them. They loved each other.

Sometimes it's easier for us to love the world than to love each other. Here's why: we don't know the people in the world. The reality is that it's a lot easier to love someone before you really get to know them. You might think I'm an easy guy to love. But that's just because you don't know me that well. Once people get to know each other, there are all sorts of opportunities to hurt each other. We are competitive with each other; we try to feel better about ourselves by beating each other; we misunderstand each other; we snub each other; we jump to conclusions about intentions and motivations; we judge each other. The list goes on and on.

This time of year a lot of the TV shows do Christmas episodes. This week we watched an episode of a show called *30 Rock* entitled "My Christmas Attack Zone." Each of the characters were doing their best to avoid the usual family drama that erupts over the holidays, but none of them were able to so. By the end of the episode the conclusion was that all families have drama. You can't escape it, so embrace your particular drama. At least it's yours.

That isn't terrible advice for us. We will have drama as a family. But that's what it means to love each other. If we're ever trying to love the world as a way of escaping each other, then we need to be careful. One of Rachel's and my highest goals as parents is that our children learn to get along with each other. We're convinced this skill will serve them the best in life, more so than anything they manage to achieve academically, athletically, or socially. To learn to forgive, share, and take turns. All the things most of us have such a hard time doing. This is what Paul wanted for the family of God in Colosse.

Suffer in Love

Paul started by talking about suffering. Then he talked about love. What is the connection? Was he just trying to make the Colossians feel bad when he talked about how hard he worked for them?

I don't think so. He tried to set an example. He demonstrated that one of the key aspects of love was the willingness to suffer. Loving another person means suffering for them. That's the key to this passage. Recognizing that Paul suffered is a form of love for them.

This isn't at all the way our world thinks about love. At the beginning of this message, I asked you to name some things that you love. I'm willing to bet that your love for most of those things stems from the fact that they produce a positive experience. I love ice cream because it tastes good. I really enjoy the experience of eating ice cream; probably too much. This is how we think about love. We love things that make us feel good. We love people when they make us feel good about ourselves. Part of that is natural—it's the way things are supposed to work. Love is a positive thing. But there is another side of love that goes deeper. That's what Paul talked about here.

Sometimes when I pray with my kids at night, I'll ask God to help us love each other. That sounds funny to my kids—they don't quite get it. They'll say, "But daddy, we do love each other." And I'll explain that, yes, we love each other, but God can help us to treat each other with more and more love.

Paul says he labored, struggled, and endured afflictions for the sake of the Colossians. The reason he did this was because that was how he loved them. That's what it took

to love them. This is what love looks like for us as well. Jesus said in John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." He's saying that the amount of love that you have is demonstrated by the amount that you're willing to suffer for that person.

When I say I love ice cream more than apple pie, I mean that ice cream gives me a greater sense of pleasure than apple pie. But when I say that I love you more than some other person, it can't mean the same thing. It has to mean that I am willing to suffer for you more than I'm willing to suffer for the other person.

It means that when you accuse me of something, I don't get defensive. I suffer whatever indignation I feel. It means when you get sick, I sacrifice my time and energy and activities to care for you. I suffer the loss of my own goals. It means that when someone is making fun of you, I stand alongside with you. I suffer the ridicule of being associated with you.

That's why Paul said he rejoiced in these afflictions. One of the lessons I've had to learn in marriage is that loving another person often involves suffering for them. But it's a suffering that pays off. It's a suffering that results in a deeper connection with someone else. Sometimes when Christians talk about rejoicing in suffering it sounds like we are supposed to enjoy the suffering. That's ridiculous. We aren't masochistic. It's just that some suffering is worth it. Suffering in love for another person means that a relational connection is formed that makes that suffering worthwhile.

Having said this, sometimes these ideas can get twisted in Christian circles. Suffering for someone does not mean being manipulated, abused, or neglected by them. Paul rejoiced in his suffering for the Colossians because he offered it to them freely. Suffering in love is never demanded through guilt tactics or victimization. It's fairly common for me to hear Christian women talking about needing to suffer more for their husbands or children in order to love them. That often makes me worried because they are often talking about relenting to demands or guilt. That's not suffering in love. That's being taken advantage of. Finding the difference is too tricky to go into right now, but it's an important distinction to make.

We said earlier that the vocation of the church is to suffer. Here we see that loving is a willingness to suffer. So our call as followers of Jesus Christ is to love. To suffer

in love. To choose willingly to endure pain for the sake of another.

Love to know Christ

The most beautiful thing about this whole process is how everything comes together in this act of love. In the previous section, Paul said that he endured afflictions for the sake of the Colossians so that they might know the mystery of Christ in them. In this section, he struggled so that they may love each other. But look at what that love leads to. That love leads to the knowledge of Christ. He wanted them to be encouraged in heart and united in love so that they may know the mystery of God.

This isn't usually the way we think. We think that we need to know Christ in order to love each other. That God's love motivates our love for each other. That's true, but Paul said that it also comes full circle. He wanted the Colossians to love each other so that they could know Christ. Knowing Christ is a consequence of their love, not just a motivation for it. Do you see how all these themes just swirl together?

When you think about this, it all makes sense. How do you know someone more deeply? By doing the things they do. By joining them in their activity. What has Christ done? He's suffered for the sake of others. What is he doing right now? He's suffering in love for his body until his kingdom is fully established. How do we know Christ? We love each other. As we truly grow in our ability to love each other, we grow deeper in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We find those treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

As a kid, I remember when I visited my father's office building and saw where he worked. I saw his desk and met some of his coworkers. But I couldn't imagine what his life was like. As an adult, I started to go to work in an office building. I had a desk. I had coworkers. I started to understand a bit more of what my father's life was like. I knew him better because I was doing the things that he did. When we suffer and when we love, we are doing the things that Christ does. This leads us to knowing Him better.

In Philippians 3:10, Paul wrote, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." Suffering helps us to know Christ. Loving others is being

willing to suffer for them. Loving others leads us to know Christ deeper.

Suffer in love to know Christ

So we've come full circle. If I have managed to make all these themes clear and draw them out, then hopefully we have seen how all of these ideas of suffering, love, and knowledge converge. Hopefully, we have seen how we suffer for the sake of loving each other and that ultimately results in our knowing Christ.

Last week we talked about a cosmic Christ. Christ who is supreme over everything that was created. Christ who is supreme over everything that has been redeemed. Christ who has entered into our lives and reconciled us to the God that we hated. Last week, I concluded that we need Christ. We don't need something new. We need something we already know. We need Christ.

This week, we start to see one way we get Christ. We get Christ when we love each other. The rest of the book of Colossians will be fleshing out that idea in more detail. As Paul ended this section, he explained how he wanted to protect them from being carried away by false teachers. He wanted them to know the truth about Christ, the truth about what it means to know Him, so that they could protect themselves against people who would make them think they needed something more. Loving others isn't really glamorous; loving each other day in and day out gets tiring and old. We'd rather have some fantastical mystical ideas that we can get carried away by. But Paul says no: Christ is in you. Love each other to know Him more.

Conclusion

This brings us to the end of our Advent series. We've seen that the book of Colossians is about Christ. It's a fitting book for a season of waiting for his return. We have to remember that the Christ that we celebrate as a baby in the manger will return to our world as a King on a throne. He will conquer the kingdoms of this world. He will establish his reign. He will return in glory.

This first part of Colossians has given us a picture of what it looks like to wait for Christ. We must have real

hope that he is returning. Our hope isn't vague or shallow, but confident and specific. We wait joyfully because our God is pleased with us. He will return to welcome us, not correct us. We wait in peace because Christ is the one who makes peace in our world. He created. He redeemed. He reconciles. Finally, we wait in love because if we are to know this Christ, we must love each other. We must do the hard work of struggling for each other, suffering for each other, and being united together by our efforts, knowing that it is God's energy at work within us.

May we continue to wait for Christ this Advent season and may we anticipate his return as we celebrate his birth.

NOTES

¹Wright, N.T., *Colossians and Philemon* (InterVarsity Press: 1986), 93.