

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Complete in Him

Colossians 2:8 – 15

We need a new perspective. As followers of Christ we need a new perspective. Too often we glide along in life as Christians, only concerned that we don't suffer too much, or are inconvenienced too badly, or that we have enough toys to make life a little bit more enjoyable. We express appropriate concern over the fate of the poor, the indigent, the sick and the less fortunate among us and in the world. Sometimes we even send money. But we have not got it through our heads that we are in a war. We have not gotten to the level the apostle Paul lived in following Christ.

He begins this section by drawing the Colossians into his world – the world where he was struggling, agonizing, fighting for something. The word he uses invoked the idea of a 'battle action' – and Paul says '*...I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you...*' He was trying to wake the Colossians up to the reality that there is a war going on. Paul was fighting for them in prayer and he wanted them to join the fight. I would like to reword Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words a little bit here. He said, 'When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.' I would like to say that **when Christ calls a man, He bids him come and fight.** 'Fight the good fight of the faith' Paul told Timothy. And he told the Thessalonians, '*But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.*' 1 Thessalonians 2:2 And at the end of his life he could say, '*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.*' 2 Timothy 4:7 The Christian life is a fight – it is a struggle against sin, a battle for the truth, a fight against all those things that would seduce us away from Christ.

And it is a battle '*...to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*' This is what Paul was agonizing over – this is what he was fighting for – this is what he spent days and nights in tear-drenched, heart-rending prayer about. The NASV says – attaining to all the wealth that comes from full assurance of understanding – **resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ.** The battle for the Christian is to reach all the riches that are in the place of full assurance when we understand the mystery of God – Christ. **This is true wealth.** In fact Paul told the Philippians the same thing in a little different way: '*But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...*' Philippians 3:7-8

The goal in this life is not heaven. **The goal in this life and the next, is Christ.** Just as we have been learning in our home fellowships – God **is** the gospel. '*For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain*'. Philippians 1:21 This was Paul's goal and this was the focus of his struggle and conflict in prayer for the Colossians. And not just for the Colossians. He mentioned one other church as well – did you notice? '*For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea.*' Colossians 2:1 His prayer for the Colossians and the Laodiceans, and for all those believers who had not yet seen or heard Paul, was that they would get all the riches that come from knowing Christ. I find it significant that Paul mentions Laodicea in context with wealth and riches because when we next hear about this church it is in Revelation and they had a little problem with wealth. Listen to what the Lord told them: '*I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.*' Revelation 3:15-17

This was a church that considered themselves rich – but the Lord's assessment was that they were poor – they thought they were doing all right – but Jesus tells them they are wretched, a people to be pitied, not admired. They thought that they looked good in their own righteous robes – but the reality was that they were naked – and they couldn't even see that they were naked because they were blind. So how did they get to this state? The Scriptures say that they were lukewarm. A lukewarm person is a complacent person – a lukewarm person is someone who doesn't really take life seriously – a lukewarm person is someone who goes along to get along – doesn't make waves or venture out over his head. He prefers to stay along the shore where the water isn't very deep and is more concerned about his comfort than about his commission. **This is a church the Lord can neither use nor bless** – instead they are such a bad taste in His mouth that He is compelled to vomit them out.

The Laodiceans evidently were not engaged in the struggle. They were not pressing in to all the wealth of Christ that comes from a full assurance of understanding resulting in a true knowledge of Christ. They were lukewarm. It seems that their worldly wealth blinded them to the riches found in Christ. They drifted along lukewarmly – to the point where they lost even their sense of their need for Christ. They lost that desperate desire for God that causes real believers to fight through everything to reach Him. They thought they were rich but they didn't have Christ, *'...in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'* Colossians 2:3 **Everything that has value is summed up in Christ.** Everything that has to do with meaning and purpose in this life and the life to come, everything related to death and life and eternity, and everything related to joy and peace and fulfillment – everything is found in Christ. I thank God, however, that He will never leave those whom He has called to be content in their lukewarmness and complacency. He tells the Laodiceans, and He is telling those of us caught in the same trap: *I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.* Revelation 3:18

He tells them to buy from Him **gold refined by fire.** Gold, in the Bible, symbolizes the divine nature of God, and Peter tells us that by believing in Christ we become partakers of the divine nature. *'...He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.'* 2 Peter 1:4 Something happens within us as we go after God in His word – we get some gold – the real gold – not fools gold – **we get God.** Partakers of the divine nature! Lukewarm people don't get that – complacent people never go there. **Because this gold is only found after it has been through the fire** - *gold refined by fire.* What the fire is for is to burn away all the stuff that isn't gold – leaving a pure substance behind. That is one of the reasons that Jesus said, in this world you will have tribulation – that is the furnace where the gold is refined – but take heart, He says, I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

This was the Laodicean's problem – **they never wanted to go near the furnace.** They were complacent – lukewarm, content as long as their world wasn't rocked. They were seduced away from Christ by the allure and deceitful promises of worldly riches and comfort to the point that they were neither on fire for God nor a cool cup of blessing for a thirsty world. They were complete in themselves and didn't think they needed anything. But the word of God to them and to us is *'...buy from Me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich.* Embrace the furnace of affliction for the sake of your souls.

He tells them also to buy **white garments to cover their nakedness.** *'...and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen'.* White garments in the Bible speak of righteousness. We read in chapter 19 of Revelation that these white garments are the righteous acts of the saints – that is what we wear in heaven will in some way reflect what we've done here on earth. But it is not our own righteousness that the Bible is talking about. When we look at Revelation chapter 7, we understand this a little better. *'Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come? I said to him, Sir, you know. And he said to me, These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'* Revelation 7:13-14 The only way any good that we do has any value is in relation to Christ. That is only that work that is done in the strength of the One who strengthens us is counted as righteous. It is the work that relies on Christ for both the inspiration and the execution. It is His righteousness imputed to us that is our covering – not our own. **And it is our work on the basis of His work that creates those white robes that we will one day wear.** *'Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done in Christ will last.'*

Finally, the Lord told them to **buy eye salve.** *'...salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.'* They needed to buy gold and white robes, and now eye salve. The Laodiceans didn't see so good, blinded as they were by the riches of the world and the cares of this life. They needed their vision restored. They were looking in the wrong places for fulfillment – for contentment – for meaning. They had lost sight of the truth and they needed something to fix their eyesight. And I believe the eye salve spoken of here is the Holy Spirit because the Lord speaks of **'anointing'** their eyes – and it is the Holy Spirit that anoints our blinded eyes to see the truth: *'...When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears he will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you.'* John 16:13-14 We need the refining fires of affliction to burn away all that isn't gold – we need the righteousness of Christ to be our covering – and we need the anointing salve of the Holy Spirit to dress and heal our sight so that we can truly see that it is Christ and Christ alone in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The Laodiceans had somehow lost sight of this transcendent Christ and were relying on their own wealth and wisdom and goodness to carry the day.

But Paul, while he lived, was laboring mightily so that this would not happen. That it did, only speaks to the fact that you can take nothing for granted. All life long we must be engaged and not allow ourselves to become complacent and lukewarm. The enemy of our souls does not rest in his attempt to distract, dissuade, discourage, deceive and destroy us. Paul went on to say: *I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.* Colossians 2:4 Here I like the NASV a little better. Instead of plausible, they translate the word as **'persuasive'**. And that really is the intent of Paul's admonition. Not just plausible, which means having an appearance of truth or reason; seemingly worthy of approval or acceptance – but **enticingly persuasive**. That is, it sounds right and looks right and engagingly appeals to our senses.

There are many persuasive gospels out there that appeal to our preferences, our desire to avoid suffering, our lust for money and power and many other things. And Paul says 'Don't listen to those guys – fight through all the seductive facades of enticing words to the real treasure that is Christ. Don't settle for the gifts – look to the Giver - *as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.* Colossians 2:6-7 How did you receive Christ? **By faith.** *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.* Ephesians 2:8-10 All our faith – our believing the Good News – even all our good works – **all of it is initiated and sustained in Christ.**

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord – walk that way – by faith. *'...rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught...'* , **Rooted in Him.** Planted in Christ. The word indicates that your roots have gone down deep in Him. It is incredibly important that our roots go down deep. When I was falling trees in another lifetime, I had a cutting job in a lowland piece of ground cutting down big cedars. I really despised that job because most of the ground was soggy and wet and by the end of the day I was soaked. As I was working one day, having felled three giant cedars, I was walking along the trunk of one of those, limbing and bucking, when all of a sudden a big wind from behind my back nearly knocked me over and there was a tremendous crash right behind me, and the tree I was on started dancing up and down. I turned around and looked and one of these giant cedars had simply fallen over and the top of the tree actually brushed my back. Apparently this massive tree, with a huge root wad, probably twenty feet across, had been depending on the trees I just cut down for its stability, and with those out of the way, it simply fell over. I went back and looked at the roots and found that although they were big – they were not very deep. They were just sucking the surface water and hadn't gone down very far – and when all the props were removed – it couldn't stand anymore. It had been trusting in the trees next to it for stability and didn't have any significant root system of its own. *Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.* Jeremiah 17:7-8

We need to be rooted in Him and **built up in Him.** The word means to build upon some already existing foundation. If we are not rooted in Him, there is nothing to build on. If we are not rooted deeply in Christ, we may find that we have built on a foundation of plausible arguments rather than on Christ. We may find that we have built our Christian life on the back of one experience that happened a long time ago but we have gone nowhere since then. The idea of deep roots is that we have a deep, solid foundation of the experience of Christ that shapes our thinking, our choices, and our actions.

We need to be rooted, and built up and **established in the faith.** Established here means to be confirmed in your faith. It means to be validated – that is, when you are rooted deeply in Him, and built up in Him, there is a sense of confirmation that your faith is genuine and not misplaced. It is the sense of stability that comes to a man that is wholly dependent and rooted down deep in Christ. It is a quality of those who do not let the circumstances of life dictate how they will feel, or how they will act. They live independent of those things that press everyone else to the wall because they live dependent on Christ. When everyone else is in a panic, when the best advice is to run in circles, scream and shout – those who are established in the faith are like a rock – because they are resting on The Rock.

We need to be rooted, and built up and established in the faith, and **abounding in thanksgiving.** One of the problems with the Laodiceans, I am convinced, is that they were not abounding in thanksgiving. Remember what they said? *'...I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing...'* People who think they need nothing are never very grateful. *Alex Haley, the author of "Roots," had an unusual picture hanging on his office wall. It was a picture of a turtle on top of a fence post. When asked, "Why is that there?"*

Alex Haley answered, "Every time I write something significant, every time I read my words & think that they are wonderful, & begin to feel proud of myself, I look at the turtle on top of the fence post & remember that he didn't get there on his own. He had help." Abounding in thanksgiving will keep us from depending on ourselves and will keep us dependent upon Christ. Because the ultimate end of those who do not give Him thanks is darkness. Romans 1 tells us that *'For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.'* Romans 1:21

With this in mind, Paul goes back to his central thought: *'See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.'* Colossians 2:8 The word Paul uses here when he says *takes you captive* is a word that means carry you off like a prize. It was used in later Greek writing to describe a kidnapping, or house plundering, or the seduction of a woman or taking captives in a battle. And Paul is saying, ***'Don't let anybody kidnap your mind – don't let them seduce you away from Christ or plunder you through mere human wisdom or reason. Don't let anyone move you away from the firm foundation of Christ by a different world view, or different values or moral teachings or principles that come from human agencies'***.

He tells the Colossians straight up that philosophy is empty deceit. It is a delusion because it sounds plausible, it is even enticingly persuasive, it attracts and seduces our minds, it has a certain truth to it – but the sum of human philosophy is empty deceit. All the philosophers of all the ages and all their books and all their ponderings weigh less than nothing in the scales of heaven when measured against the treasure of wisdom and knowledge that is in Christ. Just think, for example, of the best reason that the most brilliant minds of the world have thought up for the existence of the universe – random chance. No mathematician worth his salt would ever buy into it (and mathematicians are pretty smart people) because mathematically there is absolutely zero possibility that the universe leapt into existence by chance. But philosophers and scientists and other so-called thinkers have thought really hard about this most important question and pontificate with ponderous pride that everything happened by chance. Paul says, the bottom line is – 'Don't waste your time with any thinking that does not begin and end with Christ.' ***In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and understanding.***

For some reason, the Christian community has bought into the lie that we can understand the workings of the human psyche with the tools created by other humans. We as a community have bought into the psychobabble of the age when we turn to psychiatrists and psychologists who have been steeped in Jung and Freud and Skinner and Maslov – all of whom were anti-Christ in their thinking – to solve the deep psychological issues we humans face – instead of turning to the Creator who knows us and knows our issues more intimately and completely than we do. Don't get taken captive by thinking that is according to human tradition, Paul told the Colossians: *For in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily'* Colossians 2:9 It is as though he were saying, ***'Why would you settle for human thinking and human solutions when you can have God?'*** In Christ are hidden all the answers to all the questions of all of life.

'...and [in Him you have been made complete], who is the head of all rule and authority.' Colossians 2:10 This is the point – in Him we have been made complete. Anyone not in Christ is not complete – I don't care how smart, how wealthy, how happy, how successful – without Christ you cannot be complete. ***All of the answers to all of life's questions are found in Him.*** All the answers to the questions in your soul, all the answers for your sin, all the answers for your hope in the life to come are found only in Christ. Too many Christians today see Christ as a part of their lives, they might even say an important part, and as a result they either live shallow, superficial Christian lives, or permanently frustrating ones because life never matches their expectations. They might say they need Christ – plus philosophy; Christ plus psychology; Christ plus ritual; Christ plus some miraculous experience – Christ plus. But the good news is, ***in Him you have been made complete.***

The word means to fill completely. It has the idea of filling to the point of saturation. And the word is in the perfect tense and should be translated as 'having been made complete'. When we walk in the realm and sphere of Christ – we have the sense that we are complete. We may not be done here on earth – and God may not be done refining us with fire – but nevertheless, in Christ we are complete. That is we don't have to go to any outside agency for answers – we don't have to depend on our own goodness and disposition – we don't have to try and work up any holiness or righteousness on our own – in Him we are complete – filled up – fully supplied. Don't look to your husband or wife to complete you – don't look to your job or career to complete you – don't look to religious good works to complete you – believer, ***you are complete in Him.***

Our gracious God and Heavenly Father,

Forgive us gracious Savior, for our lukewarm and half-hearted pursuit of the riches in Christ. Forgive us too, for our complacency and apathy and living as though comfort and security in this life were most important. Cause our hearts and minds and souls to be engaged in the fight to reach all the riches of full assurance and understanding and the knowledge of Christ. You have promised in the New Covenant 'They shall all know Me from the least to the greatest'. Let this be our portion now – a kind of knowing O God, that delights in Christ and discovers all the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Him. Satisfy us O Christ with Yourself and wean us away from every lesser pleasure and joy. Grant that we would embrace that refining fire and not run from it. May all our efforts be washed in the blood of the Lamb and our vision anointed with the Spirit of Truth. Root us , build us, establish our hearts in You with songs of thankfulness and joy. Let us experience the gospel in all its fullness which is Christ crucified and risen for sinners to bring us home to You. Make us everlastingly glad in You so that will live to make the nations glad in You we pray, in the precious and powerful name of Jesus, Amen.

***May the Lord bless you and keep you,
and make His face shine upon you.
May the Lord be gracious unto you;
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you,
and give you peace.***