

June 18, 2006 by Steve Brandon



A Great Agony

Colossians 2:1-5

1. Paul's Care (verses 1, 5)
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One of the greatest of all missionaries was John Paton, missionary to the New Hebrides, which is a chain of about 80 islands in the south Pacific Ocean. During the days of John Paton, many of these islands were populated by cannibals. In fact, some twenty years before Paton arrived as a missionary to these people, several other missionaries had been killed and eaten only minutes after they arrived on the island. He was warned by an elder in his church that if he would go to these people, that he too would be eaten by the cannibals. John Paton's response to this man was classic. He said, ...

Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer. [\[1\]](#)

John Paton devoted his entire life to serving those in the islands of the New Hebrides. At one point, he saw the entire island of Aniwa turn to Christ. What made John Paton to be such a man, filled with such courage to go to the dangerous places with the gospel of Christ? Much of it has to do with his father's example. How appropriate it is for us to consider the example of John Paton's father on this Father's Day. John Paton's father had a strong desire to be a Minister of the Gospel. But, when he saw that God's will for his life would not be in this direction, he had entered "with his own soul into [a] solemn vow, -- that if God gave him sons, he would consecrate them unreservedly to the ministry of Christ." [\[2\]](#)

John Paton's father was a hard worker. He ran a workshop, where he worked daily from sun up to sun down, everyday, but Sunday. Though his family lived a four mile walk to church, he missed the worship service on only three occasions during his forty years he lived in that region. Once the snow was too deep. On another occasion, ice along the walk made it too slippery for them to walk, especially up and down the steep hillside. Third, there was an outbreak of cholera in the city, and others begged John Paton's mother to persuade her husband to stay home. Such was the demonstration of his love for his Lord.

Mr. Paton was utterly devoted to the promoting religion in his family. John's testimony of his father was that every morning and every evening for more than forty years, there was "prayer and reading of the Bible and holy singing" (p. 14). Listen to the impact that such an example left.

[When I was twelve years of age], How much my father's prayers ... impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen world to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Savior, and learned to know and love him as our Divine friend. As we rose from our knees, I used to look at the light on my father's face, and wish I were like him in spirit, --hoping that, in answer to his prayer, I might be privileged and prepared to carry the blessed Gospel to some portion of the Heathen World" [\[3\]](#)

I love the story of when John was to leave his hometown and attend divinity school in Glasgow, some forty mile's walk from where he lived. Paton said, ...

My dear father walked with me the first six miles of the way. His counsels and tears and heavenly conversation on that parting journey are fresh in my heart as if it had been but yesterday; and tears are on my cheeks as freely now as then, whenever memory steals me away to the scene. For the last half mile or so we walked on together in almost unbroken silence -- my father, as was often his custom, carrying hat in hand, while his long flowing yellow hair (then yellow, but in later years white as snow) streamed like a girl's down his shoulders. His lips kept moving in silent prayers for me; and his tears fell fast when our eyes met each other in looks for which all speech was vain! We halted on reaching the appointed parting place; he grasped my hand firmly for a minute in silence, and then solemnly and affectionately said: "God bless you, my son! Your father's God prosper you, and keep you from all evil!

Unable to say more, his lips kept moving in silent prayer; in tears we embraced, and parted. I ran off as fast as I could; and, when about to turn a corner in the road where he would lose sight of me, I looked back and saw him still standing with head uncovered where I had left him -- gazing after me. Waving my hat in adieu, I rounded the corner and out of sight in an instant. But my heart was too full and sore to carry me further, so I darted into the side of the road and wept for a time. Then, rising up cautiously, I climbed the dike to see if he yet stood where I had left him; and just at that moment I caught a

glimpse of him climbing the dyke and looking out for me! He did not see me, and after he gazed eagerly in my direction for a while, he got down, set his face toward home, and began to return - his head still uncovered, and his heart, I felt sure, still rising in prayers for me. I watched through blinding tears, till his form faded from my gaze; and then, hastening on my way, vowed deeply and oft, by the help of God, to live and act so as never to grieve or dishonor such a father and mother as he had given me. [4\]](#)

John Paton's missionary success was no accident. I believe that much of the success of his missionary endeavors had to do with his father. John Paton had a father who cared deeply for his son and demonstrated it often. John Paton had a father who prayed fervently for his son. I'm sure that as John Paton was off in the South Pacific, he knew of his father's prayer for him.

As we come this morning to our text in Colossians, chapter 2, we see another man whose care and concern for the well-being of others was great. We see him pouring out his heart for other people, that they might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God (Col. 1:10).

Colossians 2:1-5

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

Unlike John Paton, those in Colossae didn't have the privilege of personally experiencing Paul's tender affection for them, or of listening to the prayers of the apostle Paul, to understand his great heart for them. Instead, Paul has to describe his passion for these people. My first point this morning is ...

1. Paul's Care (verses 1, 5)

Notice how he describes his care for those to whom he is writing. He says, "For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face." This word translated here, "struggle" is the Greek word *agwn* (agon) from which we get our word agony. Sometimes it is translated "wrestle" or "anguish." It's a word describing an intense struggle. It's the same word used in chapter 1, verse 29, where it is translated, "striving." It is from this word that I have derived the title of my message this morning: "A Great Agony".

Paul had a great agony for the people in Colossae. This agony came out of a deep concern for these people. He cares for them, and so he agonizes for them. Obviously, his agony expressed itself in his prayers for them. After all, Paul was in prison, hundreds of miles away. Many of these people, he had never even seen before. The only way for him to labor for them was to pray for them. And that's what verse 2 expresses. It expresses a prayer. His agony is "that their hearts may be encouraged" (verse 2).

But Paul wasn't the only one agonizing for these people in prayer. Look over in chapter 4 and verse 12. There we see Epaphras, who initially started the church. We read in verse 12 that Epaphras, "who is one of your number, a bondsman of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand fully assured in all the will of God." Again, we see this same word being used, *agwn* (agon), which means, "agony." In this context, it is translated, "laboring earnestly." Or, your translation might say, "struggling" (ESV). The NIV gives a good picture of this word by translating it "wrestling." It says, "always wrestling in prayer for you." From all likelihood, Epaphras was the one who established this church in Colossae in the first place. He had a heart for these people that wouldn't simply let them on their own. He was pleading before the Lord for them, desperately wanting them to stand firm in their faith. Like Paul, he too was in prison, and couldn't get home to the church that he established and loved so dearly.

It would seem reasonable to assume that Paul had learned some of his passion for these people through simply hearing the prayers of Epaphras. What is it that placed within John Paton's soul a desire to go to the heathen lands to share the marvelous gospel of Christ? Was not much of it to be credited to the passionate prayers he heard his father pray concerning those who don't know Christ? What is it that placed within Paul a heart and desire to plead before the Lord for these people in Colossae? Was it not the passionate prayers of Epaphras that Paul was able to hear?

In verse 13 (of chapter 4) Paul gave a testimony to the Colossians of the heart of Epaphras for them. He wrote, "I testify for him that he has a deep concern for you and for those who are in Laodicea and Hierapolis." Laodicea was about 10 miles from Colossae. Hierapolis was about 13 miles from Colossae. They were all situated in the Lycus Valley. These cities were close enough to each other that they were impacted by the ripple effect of the church that Epaphras started in Colossae. Apparently, there were believers in each of these cities. Epaphras was deeply concerned for them, and he passionately prayed for them. So much so, that Paul could give testimony to these people of the heart of Epaphras.

I believe that Paul was carried along by the prayers of Epaphras to pray as he did. They were in prison together. There wasn't much to do, but pour their hearts out to the Lord, pleading for His grace and mercy upon these people in the Lycus Valley. Picture their hearts: these two prisoners, earnestly wrestling with God in prayer. In fact, the scope of Paul's prayers is the same as the scope of the prayers of Epaphras. Look back in chapter 2. Paul was agonizing in prayer for those in Colossae, as well as for those in Laodicea, as well as for those who had never seen Paul. He agonized for them because he cared for them.

This is a great place to stop and pause for a bit of application. Paul is our model. Paul cares as we ought to care. He prays as we ought to

pray. He agonizes in prayer. Do you know anything of this sort of prayer? Do you ever wrestle and agonize in prayer with God? Have you ever been like Jacob, who wrestled with God all night long in prayer and refused to let Him go until God would bless Him? (Gen. 32:26). Do you ever take heaven by storm and ask for things that are simply beyond the scope of anything that is in your power to do? Do you have a heart and care for the well-being of others, that you will pray on their behalf, longing for God to help others in their distress and difficulty?

This was Paul's heart. This ought to be our heart as well. I think in this past year, that I have wrestled and agonized in prayer more than ever before in my life. There have been circumstances that have come into our lives, where my wife and I have come to the point, where we have confessed to each other that we need divine help. We have fasted together. We have prayed together. We have sought the Lord together. We have earnestly entreated the Lord together for His help. I can simply tell you that the Lord has been faithful through all of it.

I find it interesting here that Paul wants those in Colossae to know of his care for them. In fact, the main point of verse 1 is that Paul wants for those in Colossae to be sure of his care and affection for them, as demonstrated in his prayers for them. He said, "I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf." In other words, "I want for you to know how much care and concern I have for you." This is also the point of verse 5, where he writes, "Even though I am absent in body, nevertheless, I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ." Paul says, "I'm not there with you in Colossae, but, I'm with you in Colossae. My body is here in prison, but in my spirit, I'm right there with you. I want for you to know that. I long to see you standing firm in Christ." In verses 1 and 5, Paul is making his desires clearly known. He isn't seeking to hide his request from them.

Has anybody ever told you that they were praying for you? Doesn't it do something for your heart? I'm not sure what it is, but there is something about telling others how you are praying for them that brings great comfort to them. And so, if you are praying for other people in specific ways, perhaps you might want to encourage them by telling them what you are specifically praying for them. This is exactly what Paul has done. And this leads us to our second point this morning:

2. Paul's Prayer (verses 2-3)

Verses 2 and 3 read as follows: "that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is Christ Himself, in who are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Col. 2:2-3)

Fundamentally, Paul prays for their encouragement. "I'm praying that your hearts may be encouraged." Paul is fully aware of the great difficulties surrounding these people who had converted to Christ out of their paganism. Throughout the rest of this chapter, Paul will address the issues that are confronting those in Colossae. Through the various heresies that will come their way, Paul's prayer for them is that they might not be discouraged in that what others have looks better than what they have. Because they might easily look better. Those at the Colossian church might feel inferior to those claiming to have a special "knowledge" that they don't have (Col. 2:3). They might feel as if they were missing out because they didn't go through the religious rituals that the "truly spiritual" people were going through (Col. 2:16). They might feel lacking if they didn't have all of the special, super-natural experiences that others were having (Col. 2:18). They might feel dirty and polluted if they weren't staying away from the foods and other things that some were advocating (Col. 2:21). They might not feel quite so committed to Christ, if they didn't impose some self-discipline upon themselves, to treat their bodies harshly (Col. 2:23). But Paul sought the Lord earnestly, that they might be encouraged, rather than discouraged.

Just as discouragements can come from outside the church, discouragements can come from inside the church. Paul was fully aware of the sin within the church that can bring discouragement as well. An example is when people fail to put aside their old practices and express an anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech toward one another. Or when people sin against one another in the church. Such sin can be a discouraging thing. Paul's desire is for them to be encouraged.

In his prayer, he shares two ways in which he wants them to be encouraged. The first is love. The second is in knowledge.

a) United in love.

He prays for them to be united in love. Look at verse 2, "that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love." I trust that you know what a sweater looks like. It's a hot, summer day, which means that none of you are likely wearing a sweater today. So, I brought one. My mother knows what sweaters look like. She is a knitter and over the years has knit several hundred sweaters. I have one right here. If you would take this sweater and begin to examine it, you would notice how the strands of yarn weave in and out of each other to form the entire sweater. This is a picture of what Paul is praying about. He is praying that their lives would be intertwined with each other in love. As they are, the result is a unified whole and an encouraged church. This sweater demonstrates a unity, because the strands of yarn are so closely woven together that the entire thing doesn't fall apart.

Over in chapter 3, Paul will mention how crucial love is to the unity of the church. Compassion is good (Col. 3:12). Kindness is good (Col. 3:12). Humility is good (Col. 3:12). Gentleness is good (Col. 3:12). Patience is good (Col. 3:12). Bearing with each other and forgiving each other is good (Col. 3:13). But, verse 14 says, "Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity."

A great illustration of this came this past week, when I visited a doctor. In recent years, I have noticed some moles growing on my scalp. They have grown slowly, but have been getting bigger and bigger. In recent months, they have begun to bother me a bit. I believe that probably have a six year old in our congregation to thank most for beginning to notice them. He and I have this little game that we play. Whenever we are together, we try to sneak up on each other and give each other a nuggie (in which you head lock your friend and rub his head with the knuckles of your hand). We have a limit of only once per day. It's a fun thing to do. Anyway, the mole on top of my head had been hurting sometimes after he's given me a nuggie, and so I have really noticed it. This week, I had a doctor cut them out for me. Today, I have a couple stitches on my head. These stitches are like love, which is binding my scalp together so that it might heal. So, do you want a church that is united, where the people are encouraged? Promote love among the brethren. Love is "the perfect bond of unity".

Of anything that I have sought to promote over the years here at Rock Valley Bible Church, it is for you to mix your lives with one another in love. The church is built upon relationships that we have with one another. To the extent that our relationships are strong, we are strong. To the extent that our relationships are weak, we are weak. As you interact with the people here at church, do you make it your goal to be encouraging to them in love? Are your words encouraging to them? Do you demonstrate through acts of kindness, your preference for others? Is your heart centered upon others, or are you centered upon yourself? To the extent that we are building one another up, we will be "knit together in love." To the extent that we are tearing one another down, we will be unraveled like a tangled ball of yarn.

When your relationships among those at church are right and you are loving one another, it is pure joy. When you have that, you won't be seeking other things. Someone says, "Hey, I have special knowledge" (2:3). You can say, "Yeah, but I'm with a church of people whom I love, and who love me." Someone says, "Hey, to be fulfilled, you need to observe these Sabbath days (2:16). You can say, "But, I'm fulfilled in my relationships of love with those in the church." Someone says, "Hey, you need to have a supernatural experience." You can say, "I'm already experiencing love in the family of God, why do I need more than that." In other words, when a church is knit together in love, you are protected from error, because you have no need to go elsewhere to find satisfaction. You are fully satisfied in your love toward one another.

b) Full of knowledge.

Paul also prays that the people will be full of knowledge. This is the crux of the last half of verse 2, as well as all of verse 3. When you read what Paul was praying, it seems to go on and on. We read, "and [attaining] to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, [resulting] in a true knowledge of God's mystery, [that is,] Christ [Himself], in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

When you boil all of this down, Paul was simply praying that they would understand that all that they need to know is in Christ. Notice how many times Paul mentions wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. He uses these words four times in this verse and a half. The message is that you don't need to know philosophy (Col. 2:8). You don't need to know tradition (Col. 2:8). You don't need to know Jewish festivals and Sabbath Days (Col. 2:16). You don't need to know angels (Col. 2:18). You don't need to know what not to eat (Col. 2:21). You don't need to know what not to do (Col. 2:21). You simply need to know Jesus Christ. You need to trust in Him. It's that simple.

A man named Robert Fulghum wrote a book entitled, "All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten." I don't know anything about the book, (so, I'm not promoting it or recommending it). I simply know that the title is good. He's saying that the really necessary things in life are simple things. He said, "Wisdom is not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school." He's talking about sharing the toys, being kind with your words, and washing up afterwards. These are the basics of life that all of us need to know to get along with each other.

A man named Cliff Schimmels then followed up this book with one of his own, entitled, "All I really need to know I learned in Sunday School." Again, I don't know anything about this book, (so, I'm not promoting it either). I simply know that the title is good. He's simply saying that the necessary things in religion is the simple gospel message. "Jesus Christ died for my sins. This I believe. This I trust." It is like the children's song, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." On the one hand, there is a sense that this is all that you need to know. We know this is true because Paul said that his ministry in Corinth consisted of this very thing. He said, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). However, it's a bit more than that because, the message, though simple, is deep and profound. Or, to use Paul's words, "in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

Jesus Christ is a bit like the Mary Poppins' carpet bag. Perhaps you children remember seeing this movie. After being hired as a nanny, Mary Poppins comes into her new room, with Jane and Michael watching her every step. She only has one bag. But from this bag, she pulled out a giant hat rack, and mirror, and lamp, and potted plant. With these things, she begins to furnish her room just the way that she would like it. This is Jesus Christ the more that you look into Him, the more treasures of wisdom you will find in Him.

Jesus Christ is a bit like Einstein's theory of relativity. $E = mc^2$. It takes but a moment to write down. But, it takes volumes and volumes of physics text books to fully understand and apply. You can look forever into the depths of the wisdom and knowledge of God that sent Jesus Christ to die for our sins. Some of the greatest minds that have ever lived, have made the study of Christ to be their great pursuit in this life. None of them have ever fully grasped all of the depths of His wisdom.

Remember what John wrote in John 20:25, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written." The treasures of wisdom and knowledge found in Christ are far from trivial. But, here is the key: All of wisdom is found in Christ. The error of those in Colossae were that they were seeking to find their knowledge and wisdom from *outside* of Christ, by adding something to Him. But, in fact, the truth will find its "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" *in* Christ. Paul was praying that they might fully know where true wisdom is to be found.

The exhortation comes straight to us: Let us be students of God's Word. Because the more we learn about Jesus, the more wisdom we will have to face the difficulties and discouragements of life.

3. Paul's Scare (verse 4)

Look at verse 4, "I say this so that no one will delude you with persuasive argument." Paul was fearful for these people. He was fearful that they would be persuaded away from the simple gospel of Christ. In his mind, he pictured someone coming to those in Colossae (or Laodicea, or Hierapolis). He pictured them coming with some sort of academic qualifications, with some abilities in speaking. He thought about those who would come along side those in the church, and who would speak nice sounding words, which just might persuade them away from the simple truth of the gospel of Christ. Their deception would be subtle. They wouldn't necessarily disagree with everything that was taught about Christ by Epaphras. They would simply argue that Christ wasn't sufficient. You need to find your treasure in a different box.

The majority of chapter 2 is an effort to show those in Colossae how those who were seeking to persuade them away were wrong. In every instance, Paul would bring it all back to sufficiency in Christ.

For instance, in verse 8, we read, "See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ." (Col 2:8). There is the way of philosophy, deceptions and traditions. But these aren't according to Christ who holds the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In verse 16, Paul tells of those who "act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day." The smooth talkers might direct you toward the Jewish laws. But, in verse 17, Paul says that those things are mere shadows of the reality. In verse 18, Paul speaks of those who delight "in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind." These people might argue that you need to have some sort of special experience to be spiritual. But, in verse 19, Paul points out that these people don't hold fast to the head (which is Christ). In verse 20 and 21 he speaks about decrees, such as "do not handle, do not taste [and] do not touch!" But, at the beginning of verse 20, Paul points out that one who has died with Christ ought not to submit to these things. There is no need to be regulated by such regulations.

In every single instance, Paul is taking them back to the central core of all of it: Christ Jesus. He was fearful that they would easily slip away to these false doctrines. Rather than being persuaded away, Paul's heart was for their stability in the faith (verse 5). He wanted to hear of their discipline and stability of faith. When Satan comes and tempts them to despair, Paul wants to see them looking upward to Christ who made an end to their sin. When trials come upon them and discourage them, Paul wants them to trust in their High Priest who is able to give grace in time of need.

Well, how did they do? History tells us little of what took place in Colossae. However, we do know what took place in Laodicea, for whom Paul was praying, and it's not good. Paul's fears were realized. The church in Laodicea drifted. Turn over to Revelation, chapter 3. In this chapter, we see what happened to the church.

Revelation 3:14-16

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth."

It's almost as if these words exactly describe the error that Paul was seeking to avoid. Those coming in with persuasive arguments were careful not to speak against Jesus. They simply deflected the attention away from Jesus. Here you have Laodicea, which isn't anti-Christian, following the errors of Balaam, as those of Pergamum did (Rev. 2:14). Or, in following the immorality of Jezebel (Rev. 2:20), that those in Thyatira followed. But, neither were they sold out to following the Lord. Their message was diluted. They weren't hot. They weren't cold. I believe that this is indicative of a mixed up, watered-down message. There is certainly some things in the message that are good. But, there are also many other things that dilute the message. The result? They will be spit out of the mouth of Jesus. That's how important these things are. To be persuaded away by fine-sounding argument will only lead to destruction in the end.

It's sad to say that throughout the history of the church, this has been a major recurring pattern. Things begin well, and then there is a drifting from Christ. It's not just the cults that get it wrong. Almost every liberal denomination was orthodox at one time. But, at some point the churches forgot the centrality and primacy of Jesus Christ. They forgot that the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are to be found in Christ (Col. 2:3). And it is easy to forget.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on June 18, 2006 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] John G. Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides* (autobiography), p. 56.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.