

Col. 1:24-2:3, Paul's Ministry
July 1, 1995
H. Van Dyke Parunak

Overview

1. 1:21-23 is Summary of what follows through 2:15.
 - a) 1:21-22, "You ... hath he reconciled," is amplified in 2:10-15.
 - b) 1:23a, "Not moved away from the hope of the gospel," 2:4-9.
 - c) 1:23b, "I Paul am made a minister," 1:24-2:3.

2. 1:24-2:3, Paul's Ministry (1:23b)
Structure is a complex device attested numerous times in Ezekiel: unfolding with appending. Unfolding turns a linear sequence into a chiasm; appending adds something new that is not in the first panel. Thus: AB -> CBABC. Specifically:
 - a) Linear Panel
 - 1) 1:24, Suffers for the Church
 - 2) 1:25-26a, Nature of his Ministry
 - b) Chiastic Panel
 - 1) 1:27, Treasures in Christ
 - 2) 1:28, Benefits of his Ministry
 - 3) 1:29-2:1, Suffers for the Church
 - 4) 2:2, Benefits of his Ministry
 - 5) 2:3, Treasures in Christ

The first two sections are the linear summary.

A. 1:24, Suffers for the Church

An amplification; the second sentence amplifies and explains the first.

1. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you." They would know of his sufferings. At the very least, he is now in prison because of his uncompromising preaching of the gospel. They will also have heard of his sacrifices as he has traveled throughout the world to plant churches. But how could he rejoice in these sufferings?

2. The amplification explains: "I am continually filling up what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the church." Invites two questions:
 - a) What does it mean to "fill up what is lacking of the sufferings of Christ"?
 - 1) RC view: the righteousness of Christ is in itself inadequate for the forgiveness of his people, and must be supplemented by good deeds of the saints, laid up in a "treasury of merit" from which the Pope can dispense indulgences. But
 - a> Mere human merit nowhere assigned such saving value.
Isa: All our righteousnesses are filthy rags. Paul (Phil

3): counts personal righteousness as dung; Rom. 7:14, "I am carnal, sold under sin."

b> Christ's saving works nowhere represented as defective. In fact, the whole point of Heb. 10:1-14 is that our Lord's suffering is complete and sufficient in regards to procuring our salvation.

c> In fact, Christ's substitutionary work is never called by this term ("affliction" *qlipsis* often "tribulation").

2) A better explanation:

a> They are "sufferings of Christ" because whatever his people suffer, he suffers with them. Cf. his words to Saul on the road to Damascus: "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4); "he that toucheth you toucheth the apple of [God's] eye" (the tender center of the eyeball) (Zech. 2:8).

b> They are "for the sake of the church," because Paul is referring to what he has suffered in order to evangelize and build up the churches.

c> They "fill up what is lacking" because the Lord does not let suffering come upon his people capriciously or carelessly. He does permit it, but it is carefully budgeted. There is a limit to it. It may go so far, but no farther. This was specifically so in Paul's case, per Acts 9:16 (*hosa* quantitative).

b) How does this realization enable Paul to rejoice in his sufferings?

1) They are permitted, bounded, and controlled by a loving Father who will not suffer him to be tempted beyond his ability.

2) Christ is his companion in them. Cf. our thunderstorm in the UP; old soldiers' war stories. Even suffering is bearable when we can share it with those we love.

3) *Application*: These same realizations are available to us.

B. 1:25-26a, Nature of his Ministry

Paul claims to have "become a minister," lit. *diakonos* "servant" (same word that means "deacon" within a single local church). He does not take to himself the title of "elder," as Peter does, but is content to be a "roving deacon."

1. This ministry is amplified by being described as a "dispensation." This word is not usually correctly understood.

- a) In DTS and Scofield Bible contexts, refers to a distinguishable period in God's dealings with people, such as Israel under the covenant of Sinai; the church age; the Millennium. There are such periods, and it is useful to distinguish them, but the word "dispensation" in the Bible never refers to such a period (not even in Eph. 1:10, see commentaries), so it is dangerous to pervert it by applying it to them.
- b) It is not a *period*, but rather a *responsibility* assigned to a specific *person*, the steward or household manager. A "dispensation" is something "dispensed" or "given out." Cf the use of the word to mean "permission," as when Catholic kings used to seek a dispensation from the pope to divorce their wives. In the Bible, the word always refers to the stewardship entrusted by the lord of the household to the household manager. How does this image fit our text?
- 1) God is the householder; the stewardship is "the stewardship of" or "from God."
 - 2) Paul is the steward, the one to whom the stewardship is "given." Elsewhere he describes himself as a steward: 1 Cor. 4:1, where the stewardship is said to be "the mysteries of God," which come into focus in the next verse.
 - 3) The household over whom Paul has this stewardship is "you," the believers.
2. The purpose or objective for which Paul "became a minister" is "to fulfill the word of God." (Hollenbach's second constraint demands that the infinitive go back to the finite verb *egenomhn*, and not to the less specific participle *doqeisan*.) What does this mean?
- a) *Other explanations of the verb--not in sermon.*
- 1) Some trace the parallel with Rom. 15:19, "fulfill the gospel," "preach the gospel throughout a region." But "gospel" often has the active sense "the action of preaching" (TDNT s.v. *euaggelion*), which *logos* does not, and in fact Paul is about to acknowledge that he has not preached the gospel in person to the Colossians!
 - 2) Others think of Acts 20:20, 27, "all the counsel of God."
 - 3) Elsewhere in the NT the phrase consistently refers to the fulfillment of a prophecy. But Paul never uses this exact phrase elsewhere, and uses "fulfill" of prophecy only in Acts (13:27), which may reflect Luke's usage.
- b) Paul writes of fulfilling the law (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:14) or a ministry (Col. 4:17), in the sense of carrying out a charge. I think his reference here is to his commission from the Lord on

the road to Damascus (which fits with the theme of fulfilling the sufferings of Christ, described above).

- 1) Acts 26:16-18 recalls the commission the Lord gave him at that time. Notice the emphasis on preaching to the Gentiles, who are to be sanctified "by faith which is in me," rather than by Jewish law.
- 2) The "word of God" that Paul says he is to fulfill is further defined as the mystery that has been hidden but now is revealed. This mystery is defined in Eph. 3:3-6 as the equal standing of Gentiles with Jews before God. Cf. Rom. 16:25,26, which directly ties the "mystery" to his proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles.
- 3) There, Paul claims that God made this teaching known to him "by revelation." The revelation may well refer to the commission to the Gentiles in the Damascus experience. Cf. Rom. 16:25,26, which directly ties the "mystery" to his proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles.
- 4) Conclusion: the "word of God" that Paul is to fulfill is the commission God gave him on the road to Damascus to preach the gospel to the gentiles, something that could not have been anticipated from the OT (which presumes that Gentiles will come through Israel). Becoming a servant to the churches is how he fulfills this charge from God.
- 5) *Application*: What is God's word for your life? Do you have a "charge to keep," a sense of divine commission that you must fulfill?

Now the chiastic development, surrounded with the added theme, "Treasures in Christ". This is actually an enrichment of his ministry, describing the message he carries, the gift he bears.

C. 1:27, Treasures in Christ

1. Acts and Paul's letters are full of various details of the gospel. Here he presents what he considers the focus, the jewel, the cherry on the Sundae, "the riches of the glory of this mystery," which God specifically wants his saints to know. It is not a complete exposition of the mystery, but only the very best part of it: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Consider each phrase separately.

2. "Christ in you": The Lord Jesus lives within every believer, in the person of the HS.
 - a) Promised in the New Covenant: Ezek. 36:16-32, cf. 27, "I will put my Spirit within you." NB: Ezekiel understood this only of Israel. The mystery is that it should be made available to the Gentiles as well.

- b) Promised by the LJC: John 14:16-20. Cf. v.17,20; "Christ in you" is realized by the indwelling HS.
- c) Affirmed by the apostles: Gal. 2:20 "Christ liveth in me"; 2 Cor. 13:5 "Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates." Perhaps most strongly, Rom. 8:9-11. The sense will be clearer if one reverses the "and" and "but" at the beginnings of vv.10,11 respectively; both are the same particle, but may bear either sense, and the main contrast here is between 9 and 10.
- d) *Application*: Are you aware of the HS within you? Does he strengthen you in righteousness and rebuke you when you sin? Do you conduct yourself in the knowledge that you are the dwelling of God through his Spirit?

3. "the hope of glory": two senses here.

- a) Promise, Eph. 1:13,14. The HS is described as an earnest, a down payment, a promise of something better to come in the future, as in Gen. 38:17, 18, 20, where Judah promises to send Tamar a kid from the flock, and as an "earnest" gives her his seal. The presence of God's Spirit in us shows us that he is in earnest about our full redemption.
- b) Mechanism, Rom. 8:11. The HS works in us to transform us into Christ's likeness and prepare us for our reunion with our Lord at his second coming.
- c) *Application*: Take hope in times of difficulty. Your redemption draws near, and God has given you both the promise and the mechanism of it within you.

D. **1:28, Benefits of his Ministry**

With his thoughts full of the day of the Lord's return and the role of the HS in preparing us and sealing us for that day, Paul does not wipe his hands and turn away, but rather describes two activities in which he is involved that are part of the Spirit's provision in preparing us for the Lord's return: warning and teaching. Verbal mechanisms that God intends us to use in helping one another prepare for that day.

- 1. Teaching: authoritative verbal instruction. The dominant feature in many evangelical churches. Emphasis on exegesis and exposition. Paul seeks to do it "in all wisdom," not puffed up with knowledge for its own sake, but still he urges that it be done. This activity is the focus of a particular gift in the church, and we are admonished by James (3:1), "be not many teachers."
- 2. Warning: 4x warn, 4x admonish. Noun is 3x admonition. Jay Adams teases out three recurring themes of this word family in the NT:
 - a) Unlike teaching, it presumes a problem. There is something

wrong in the person being admonished or warned. We all know that we are sinners, but if we are to benefit from this ministry we must be willing to have people talk with us about our problems, and not become defensive. Too often we reply to admonition defensively, either by denying the problem altogether, or by saying, "I'm so sinful, there's no use trying; there's no hope, so why should I bother?" God has provided the ministry of admonishment because our problems DO come in bite-sized pieces. They CAN be addressed.

- b) Like teaching, admonishment is verbal. God has provided other forms of correction that are based in acts; this is based in speech. We do it by talking with one another about our problems.
- c) There are many different ways that we can talk with people about their problems, and not all of them are admonishment.
 - 1) Sometimes we may simply listen passively, letting them talk. This is often a valuable ministry, but it is not admonishment. In particular, asking people "why" they did something wrong will not help. We know why we do sinful things: because we are sinners! What we need to focus on is what we have done and what we are going to do about it.
 - 2) Too often we tear down one another, beating on the faults of another in a way that elevates ourselves. This is a common weakness, but one from which we should ask God's deliverance. "If you bite and devour one another, take heed that you be not destroyed one of another," Gal. 5:15.
 - 3) Admonishment is directive speech that seeks the improvement and happiness of the other. I admonish you when I help you to see your problem, warn you of the dangers of continuing in it, point out God's provision for it, pray with you for his strength in addressing it.
- d) A very important contrast with teaching is that there is no gift of admonition, nor any warnings about participating in it. On the contrary, Paul writes to the church in Rome that they are "able to admonish one another" (15:14). In fact, note the correspondence between Rom. 15:13-15.
 - 1) 13 recalls the "Christ in you, the hope of glory";
 - 2) 14 is the "admonishment" part of 1:28;
 - 3) 15 is the authoritative "teaching" part of 1:28.

Caution: Col. 3:16 indicates that the church should "teach and admonish" one another through "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." So there is a role for teaching other than the authoritative form, in which many can engage (though Rom. 15:14 still seems more inclusive than Col. 3:16). The point to

be emphasized here is that there is a warning against authoritative teaching, but not against admonishment.

E. **1:29-2:1, Suffers for the Church**

Here at the center, Paul returns to the theme introduced in 1:24, his suffering for the sake of the church. But there is a slight shift in emphasis. There, the words used reflected his passiveness in the suffering: "sufferings," "afflictions." Now the vocabulary is active, derived from the root *agwn* (our "agony," but the Greek sense focuses on a battle): a verb "to strive" in 1:29 and a noun "conflict" in 2:1.

1. Present tense verbs.

- a) When we think of Paul's "conflict" for his churches, we think of his disputings with false teachers, or preaching the gospel under adverse circumstances (cf. 1 Thes. 2:2, "contention"). There may be some of that implied here, since his letter does address false teaching (though it is not nearly so "contentious" a letter as Galatians, and he explicitly includes those he has never met among the beneficiaries).
- b) But cf. Col. 4:12, "laboring" (same verb) fervently for you in prayers." He is lifting them up before the Father. The content follows in 2:2. Note how 2:2 corresponds with 1:28; the one describing the goal of his ministry when present with them, the other reflecting his prayer ministry when absent.
- c) Suggests an intensity in prayer that we need to learn.

2. Source of his strength.

- a) In 1:24, he could bear suffering because he recognized that Christ was suffering along with him.
- b) So here, his energy comes from Christ's work in him.

3. Scope of his ministry. Not only the Colossians, but also the Laodiceans, and any to whom he has not had the privilege of personal ministry. He is so eager to see saints perfected for the glory of God that he will preach to all he can, and pray for the rest.

4. Note, after Alford: the Colossians and Laodiceans are included within the group of those who "have not seen my face in the flesh," for that group, referred to by "their" in v.2, becomes in turn "you" in v.4. This gives particular urgency to his concern. He has not had the chance to bring them up acc. to his standards, so is especially concerned for them.

F. **2:2, Benefits of his Ministry**

1:28 pointed out the benefits of his ministry as focused on the coming glory, "to present every person perfect in Christ." His work also has objectives in this present life: their present comfort, which they will realize by "being knit together in love." The verb is used in Eph. 4:16 and Col. 2:19 for the knitting together of the

members of a body, and here too probably refers to the life of believers with one another in the local church as the main mechanism of the comfort he desires for them. This knitting together has three characteristics:

1. How are they thus knit together? "In love," the fundamental glue of the body of Christ, the object of his "new command" to his disciples, John 13:34; 14:12, 17, and the repeated burden of John's first epistle. The greatest resource God has given us for help and comfort in this life and on our way to the next is our brothers and sisters. If we do not love one another as we ought, we lose incalculably. And don't start by saying to one another, "Why don't you love me more?" Start by reviewing your love for one another and asking God to help you love more.
2. To what end does this knitting serve? Given twice--first subjectively, as they perceive it, then objectively, the hard facts.
 - a) Subjectively, "full assurance." The knitting together brings them to the "riches of the full assurance of understanding."
 - 1) "Full assurance," their subjective satisfaction with the teaching they have received, and the only real shield against the false teachers. He seeks, not their outward conformity with his creed, but their inward comfort and persuasion.
 - 2) "of understanding." This assurance is not to be worked up for political reasons, nor based on social convention, but founded in firm understanding. "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, and of power, and of a sound mind," 2 Tim. 1:7.
 - 3) "All riches." Such an assurance, firm in the heart and grounded in the mind, is a precious treasure that he would have them value.
 - b) Objectively, "full knowledge." This knitting together produces full knowledge of the mystery: the plan of salvation; God's purpose to spread it through the nations; the crowning jewel that is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Here is the object of the "full assurance" spoken of in the previous clause.
 - c) How does the knitting together produce these ends? through the ministries of teaching and admonition. Cf. Eph. 4:16, "the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part."

G. 2:3, Treasures in Christ

Finally, we return to the theme of 1:27, the surpassing value in our Lord and the knowledge of him. There, the value was Christ in them.

Here, it is what they have in Christ. The false teachers would draw their attention off after myriads of angels, and obscure fables and stories, in order to gain wisdom and knowledge. But they already have all they need of that in Christ. They should seek, not other things besides Christ, but Christ himself. In his example; in his teachings; above all, in the personal knowledge of himself, they will find more than all the false teachers can offer. This insight should lead us to the resolve Paul exhibited in Phil. 3:7-11, to count all else but loss for the knowledge of Christ. In Phil. his focus was on what the Jew valued; here, it is on what the Greek valued; in both cases, the answer is to know Christ.