Colossians 1:24-2:5

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[0:00] I don't know if you like watching adverts on television. Maybe you walk out of the room when the adverts come on. I find them quite interesting. I find them quite interesting because I'm a bit of a nerd like that I suppose.! But there's a new advert I've seen the last couple of weeks for a Samsung mobile phone. Now I don't know anything about mobile phones.

But this advert just shows you this new phone. I don't know what number it is because I don't care. At all sorts of angles with its lights and its design and it looks beautiful. It doesn't tell you what it costs. It doesn't tell you where it's available. It doesn't tell you what it can do.
It just shows you what it looks like. Why? I suppose the reason is that in our culture we value style often over substance, don't we?
Now I've no doubt the latest Samsung mobile phone does everything you could ever dream a phone will do for you and more. But what they're selling it on is not the substance but the style, what it looks like. Now that might be alright in buying a mobile phone but it can be disastrous for our lives if we work everything on the basis of what is stylish rather than what has substance.
Spiritually it's disastrous if we follow what has style instead of what has substance. That's why Paul is writing to the Colossians. If you look down to verses 4 and 5 if you've got it on your phone of chapter 2. If not I'll read them to you.
[1:21] Paul says, I say this, all this stuff talking about myself and what I do and what my goal is, I say this. In order that you may not, that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

He's writing so no one may delude the Colossians with plausible arguments. Now what are the kind of plausible arguments, the plausible beliefs in our own day? I suppose some would say it's plausible that if God loves you, you'll have a happy, healthy life.
It's plausible to many people that all religions are basically the same. So providing you believe something sincerely, it doesn't matter what you believe. That sounds very plausible these days.
For others it sounds plausible that science really explains everything. Everything. Everything that's true, everything that's reliable, we know through science. That's plausible to many people.
These are plausible beliefs that we may be deluded by if we're not careful. And so we need to pay careful attention to what Paul says to stop the Colossians being deluded, to stop us being deluded as well.
[2:31] And he's telling us in these verses what true spiritual leaders look like, so we know who to trust. He's telling us what true spiritual teaching looks like, so we know what to listen to.

And he's telling us what true spiritual maturity looks like, so we know what to aim for. So let's look first for true spiritual leaders. In Paul's day there'd be people wandering around from city to city teaching philosophy and getting paid if they were any good.
They could earn quite a lot of money doing that. They'd look pretty smart. There were others who were leaders of the local mystery religions that flourished in what is now Turkey in those days.
And they had special secrets they could let the initiated into. They looked pretty successful. What does Paul look like in contrast? If you'd see the Apostle Paul working, what would you see?
Well, see what he says in verse 24. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I'm filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body.
[3:31] That is the church. The first thing Paul draws attention to is he suffers. He suffers. Now these other spiritual leaders didn't suffer. The flash philosophers who were successful, they didn't suffer.

They were driving the Audis and BMWs and the prestige cars of their day. They had the Samsung mobile phones. They looked pretty cool. Not Paul. He suffers. But do you notice he rejoices in that suffering because there's a purpose in it.

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See what he says. He's filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church. Now what on earth does that mean? Well first of all there is something it cannot mean.
It cannot mean there is something lacking in regards to Christ's suffering to bring people back to God. Paul has already said in the previous verses that in Christ the Colossians are holy and blameless in God's sight.
He's already said that in Christ God has reconciled everything to himself. So there's nothing lacking in Christ's sufferings in terms of Christ's sacrificial death for us.
[4:38] So Paul isn't suffering to make up for something Christ didn't do. Rather Paul is suffering because he belongs to Christ. He's suffering not to add to Christ's work but because of Christ's work.

Because Paul is one of Christ's people. Even back in the Old Testament, Daniel chapter 7 if you want to look it up later. God has said that in days to come his king, his forever king, the Christ, would suffer and his people would suffer too for a time.
And so Paul is picturing here a set amount of suffering that has to be endured by God's people. You ever see those kind of fundraising projects?
You often get them in churches, don't you? Drive past a church, there's a big sign on the side that looks like a thermometer. They're raising money for a new steeple or something. And as they raise money, the thermometer fills up.
Well it's like that. Paul is imagining there's a set amount of suffering for God's people. It's not just imagining it, it's the way it is. It is true. We read about it also in Revelation chapter 6. And Paul is taking hits for the team as it were.
[5:44] He's taking on himself some of that suffering. He's filling up some of that himself. There's a bit less to go up on the thermometer. He's not doing it for himself. He's taking hits for the team.

He suffered. That's the first thing about Paul and about all true spiritual leaders and teachers. They will suffer. But secondly, he served. Look at verse 25. He suffered and he served.
It talks about the church, verse 25, of which I became a minister, literally a servant, according to the stewardship from God. Paul is a servant. He's been given this stewardship, this responsibility by God.
So he's responsible, accountable to God. He's not in it for himself. And he's doing it for the interests of other people. He's a servant for your sake, he says back in 24.
The stewardship is given me from God for you, to make the word of God fully known. He's accountable to God and serving other people. He suffers.
[6:44] He's a servant. But also he struggled. Look at verse 29 if you've got a Bible there. Him we proclaim, warning everyone, teaching everyone your wisdom, that we represent everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy. In chapter 2, verse 1, I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you. The word translated struggle there in the original language is the word from which we get agonizing.
Agony. Agonizing. Paul is agonizing in his labors for people. He's agonizing to preach. He's agonizing in prayer, verse 1. He's working for those he's never met face to face.
He's agonizing. He struggles. So he suffers. He serves. He struggles in preaching and prayer. That is what true spiritual leadership looks like.
It's Christ-shaped. It's Christ-shaped. Christ served. Christ suffered. Christ struggled in his ministry. And so those who speak in his name do the same.
[7:54] If you value style over substance, if the Colossians valued style over substance, they ditch Paul any day and go for the philosophers driving their Audis. They listen to the religious teachers who had their top secret things to tell.

Paul says, ignore those. True spiritual teachers live Christ-shaped life. Suffering. Struggling. Serving. So the question for us is, who do we listen to?
What do we look for in people we look to for spiritual guidance? Is it how many books they sold? Is it how big their church is? Is it how many followers they have on Twitter?
How many friends on Facebook? I was given an article recently about a preacher somewhere in North America who is raising funds for his new private jet. Incredible, isn't it?
See, if you value style over substance, you go for the guy with the jet, won't you? If you value substance over style, you go for the one who suffers, who struggles, who serves. True spiritual

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teachers live Christ-shaped lives.
[9:02] But what is the true spiritual message about? What is the teaching we should listen to? Well, remember what Paul has told us. He's trying to keep us from plausible arguments that could delude us. Now, in those days, if we lived in Colossae, there were these mystery religions.

People would come and say, come here, I've got a secret I can tell you. If you can come and be initiated, I'll let you into this powerful secret which will unlock the universe for you, give you fulfilment, give you hope.
And people always like secrets like that, don't they? We still get them today. Look on almost any website and you'll find a link to the secret to investment success, the secret to waste loss, the secret to happiness.
People love a secret, don't they? And if it's a secret that only some people have, then it makes those on the inside feel really good about themselves, doesn't it? There's great value in having something that nobody else has.
Well, in contrast, look what Paul does. He's got a secret, he says, verses 25 and 26, but it's not a secret he's keeping to himself. Look what he says. Verse 25, I've become a minister according to the stewardship from God which is given to me for you.
[10:11] Why? To make the word of God fully known. What is the word of God? It's the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints.

When the Bible talks about a mystery, it's not talking about it in a kind of Agatha Christie sense. It's something to solve. Rather, it's something that can only be revealed by God. It's something that would be secret that we could never guess unless God revealed it.
Paul says God has revealed it and he's given me this commission to make it fully known. So what is this mystery? What is this secret? Verse 27, To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
Paul says that's the secret and it's an open secret. It's a secret I'm telling you. And it's a fantastic secret. Christ, who we'd already talked about as being the one for whom and through whom everything was created.
Christ, who came and lived in the flesh and died a gruesome death to bring rebels back to himself. This Christ, this Christ who from all eternity has been God, can live in you, Paul says.
[11:22] Not only that, that's just the beginning. That's just a deposit guaranteeing what's to come. Christ in you, the hope of glory. Now what is glory?

Glory is actually the longing of every human heart. Glory is why people will buy the Samsung mobile phone because they want life to be perfect. Glory is why people will click on those websites with secrets of investment success because they want health and wealth and happiness.
But glory doesn't come through those things. Glory comes when God remakes the world and makes it new again. And we get to live with him in a perfect world as we were meant to in relationship with God where there will be no more sadness and sickness, no more death and despair and depression.
That's glory. Paul says, this is God's secret. You can have Christ in you now. The hope of glory to come. So that's what Paul's teaching is about.
It's an open secret. He is to make Christ fully known. The word of God fully known, he says. And not only fully known but also widely known. Look at verse 28.
[12:38] Who's Paul preaching this message to? Him, that is Christ, we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

This is not a message for a spiritual elite. This is not a message for an intellectual elite who can handle it. It's not a message for a cultural elite who shapes society.
It's not a message for those who've paid money to be part of the initiated. It's a message for everyone. This is Paul's work. He's making Christ fully known and making Christ widely known.
See, Paul is telling us that true spiritual message is not some special insight or some secret knowledge or some conspiracy theory you need to go inside of. True spiritual message is Christ shaped.
Just as true spiritual leaders are to be Christ shaped. So the message is all about Christ. He is the beginning, he is the goal, he is the centre of God's plan. It's all about him. So that's what Paul preaches.

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[13:45] To anyone and everyone. Now today, of course, people scoff at the idea that Christ is the most important thing to hear about. The most important thing to know about. On the one hand, some people will say, actually, you know, it's alright to have your religious views but science is really where we know all truth.

If you can't prove something scientifically then it's not really true. That's what many people say and believe. What would Paul say to that? Well, if you can see the passage, look down to verse 3 of chapter 2 for a moment.
He says Christ is not just for a religious part of life, Christ is for all of life. Chapter 2, verse 2, he talks about people coming to a full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery which is Christ.
Then verse 3, in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge. In other words, Paul is saying, if you don't know Christ, you don't really know anything.
If you don't know Christ, you don't really know anything. Oh yes, you can do some good observations and a test sheet of what happens. Yes, you might be able to do some physics experiments and understand some things.
[14:55] But you don't really know anything because Christ is the key to everything. He's the one for whom it was made. He's the one through whom it was made. He is the one who holds everything together.

If you do not know Christ, you do not know anything. Earlier on today as we were trying to get into the cupboard downstairs to get the Bibles and the drinks out, Alan was given a whole pile of keys by someone in the council.
So go and see if you can get in. And there must have been about, what, 40 keys on that key ring, Alan? I don't know how many you had. It was huge. And so Alan diligently went through every one. But he didn't have the key.
He didn't have the key that unlocked what we actually needed. You can have all sorts of things in life. But if you do not have Christ, you do not have what you need.
In him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And they're hidden in the sense that many people look at Christ and say, well, that Jesus of Nazareth, he was a carpenter crucified 2,000 years ago. I don't even know if he existed.
[15:58] So dismiss him. It's not obvious that the treasures are in him. But for those who know him, there is a lifetime and eternity of discovering the riches and the treasures of knowing Christ.

It is madness to want to know anything else besides him, said John Calvin back in the 16th century. Well, what else sounds plausible to us? It's plausible these days that all religions lead to God. That's a very common idea, isn't it? Again, what does Paul say? It's only through Christ we're brought back to God. It's only through Christ that God unveils his mystery plan of making everything new and making everything right.
Do you not have Christ? You have nothing. Do you want me to see if I plausible arguments, Paul says? True spiritual leaders are Christ-shaped. The true spiritual message is Christ-shaped.
It's all about him. So what then does true spiritual maturity look like? What is true spiritual growth? Well, I wonder, if we went out on the streets and went up to Huxbridge Road now and asked people, what does spiritual maturity look like?
[17:08] I wonder what answers we get. I expect for most people the idea that comes to mind is that sort of idea of someone who's very calm, very peaceful, who perhaps meditates on a regular basis.

A few years ago the book came out, Eat, Pray, Love, a memoir by Elizabeth Gilbert who was a journalist in New York and he kind of left that behind to go off in search of meaning in life.
And in the praise section of the book she goes to India to learn from a guru and get into meditation and all this kind of stuff. And for most people that's what spiritual maturity looks like. It's that individual alone, meditating, finding peace and contemplation.
Peace and harmony. What does Paul say spiritual maturity looks like? Look at verse 28. What does he do to make people spiritually mature? Christ we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.
See, for individuals to be spiritually mature it isn't about meditating and emptying their minds to get peace. It's about being taught filling their minds with Christ. It's not necessarily an easy process.

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[18:22] Paul says it means warning everyone or admonishing, correcting. It means being receptive to learning and critique. It means having our thinking, our affections, our behaviour changed by knowing Christ so we know him more.

See, the goal is to be in Christ and the method is to be taught Christ. So maturity is found first of all not in emptying ourselves but in knowing Christ personally.
But that's not all Paul says about Christian maturity here. Look down to chapter 2 for a moment. Let me read this to you. Chapter 2 verse 1. I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea another town near Colossae and for all who have not seen me face to face that their hearts may be encouraged being knit together in love to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of the mystery which is Christ.
Do you see the implication of what he's saying? You not only have to know Christ personally but you can only know Christ communally in community.
It takes the church being knit together in love to grasp the full riches of assurance of understanding of the knowledge of Christ. So that modern idea that spirituality is sitting on your own contemplating is completely wrong as far as Paul's concerned.
[19:49] It might sound plausible to us but it's not what the Bible calls spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is about knowing Christ personally but knowing Christ through being in a community. It's not just about individuals.

It's being together. There are some sports you can do on your own aren't there? You can go swimming on your own. You can even time yourself against the clock if you want to or just see how many lengths you do. You can swim on your own.
You cannot play rugby or football or hockey on your own. It's a team sport isn't it? Christian maturity is not a solo thing. It's not like swimming. It is a team game if I can put it like that.
We mature together. Now these days people often say I don't need to go to church I listen to a sermon on the internet. I don't need to go to church I pray on my own I can read the Bible for myself.
Paul says that's not true. If you want spiritual maturity you need to be knit together with other believers to even have the full riches of understanding of God's mystery.
[20:50] True spiritual maturity maturity is Christ centred. It means knowing Christ personally and knowing Christ communally together corporately in community and that takes a church.

Do you hear Paul's heart throughout this passage? He's laying his life out before these people he's never met. He's telling them what motivates him makes him what animates him what he cares about.
And he's saying all this so that no one will delude you with plausible arguments. There are plausible arguments in the Colossians day there are plausible arguments in our days.
Paul's warning us do not go for style over substance. You want true spiritual teachers? They're Christ shaped. Listen to those who serve who struggle who suffer.
You want true spiritual teaching? It is Christ centred. It's not just nice philosophy. It's all about him. True spiritual maturity? It's Christ shaped.
[21:50] It's about him. It's about knowing him personally. About being prepared to learn and prepared to be changed. It's about knowing him corporately. About being knit together with others. God fulfills all his purposes through Christ.

So we must make Christ the centre of our lives. So that we're not deluded and taken off track. Let me pray for us.

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