

The Art of Becoming Wise in Christ

Scriptures

Gen 18:1-14

Ps 15

Col 1:21-29

Luke 10:38-42

Opening

Behind him was a mob and his third shipwreck, ahead of him was a trial and his eventual execution. What was Paul thinking about from this house (arrest) in Rome, awaiting trial that could determine his life? He wasn't pitying himself, ruminating on all that he had suffered. He was thinking of Christians more than 1,200 miles away, in Colossae. Everything he had suffered at the hands of a mob in Jerusalem, in a shipwreck in Rome, and whatever the future held, it was all for *their sake*—theirs and all the churches who worshiped King Jesus. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings," Paul says from his Roman captivity, "for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church."

He had suffered much before he penned his letter to the Colossians. He would suffer much more after it was sent. Paul was always at the tip of the spear of the suffering Church. When he says, "in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions," he's not implying that there was anything insufficient about Jesus' atonement on the cross. He's saying that until Jesus the Messiah returns to earth, the kingdoms of this world will wound and mar the Body of Christ on earth—the Church—just as they wounded and killed the Head of that Body, Jesus, on the Cross. If you belong to the Messiah, then you will share in his suffering until he returns. Paul gladly shares that suffering on behalf of these Christians so far away. If all the attention can be directed to Paul, that means churches like Colossae have greater opportunity to mature in the Kingdom of God and grow in Christ.

And this is what I find so interesting about the whole letter to the Colossians. Paul, having suffered so much, believing he would suffer yet more, speaks of a deeper burden than his own afflictions. Something else burns within him.

This Sunday and the two weeks following, we will meditate on Paul's Letter to the Colossians, a kind of mini-series within the ACNA Lectionary. This letter is one of the most majestic and inspired writings on the Christian life in the New Testament. So please return with me to Colossians 1.21-29 on page 983 of your pew Bible.

The Burden of Paul's Heart

For all he endured from Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima to Rome, Paul pours out his heart in verse 29: "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me." What is the 'this' for which Paul toils? What is the source of his inner struggle for which only Christ can strengthen him?

That Paul could present everyone—literally *everyone*—mature in Christ Jesus. Paul, one of the most Jewish of Jews, became an apostle to the Gentiles. And in the mystery of Pentecost, God sent his Holy Spirit to dwell *inside* people of *all* nations. Paul knows *this* is the treasure of the Gospel that can't be lost—Christ in you, the hope of glory. Christ *inside* you, your heart beating as his heart beats; your hands moving as his hands would move, your feet walking where he would walk. Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Paul was no evangelist who skipped town after some conversions and baptisms happened. He toiled, he struggled to see all these little Christs grow up into fully mature Christians.

So while he's a captive under house arrest 1,200 miles a way, his heart and soul burn within him that his sisters and brothers in Colossae would become *wise*. Not just acquire a little wisdom here and there, a few 'nuggets' or little 'pearls.' Not clever life hacks. No—"teaching everyone with *all* wisdom. The fullness of wisdom revealed in Christ Jesus.

The Allure of Knowledge

As we dig further in this letter in coming weeks, we'll see that Paul has this burning desire for the Colossians to acquire wisdom, but he *toils* and *struggles* for this purpose because another gospel—a false gospel—is circulating around Colossae. And that false gospel said that salvation or the good life would come through **knowledge**. A kind of secret knowledge about the world. But this knowledge wasn't for everyone, only the elites. The name of this false gospel was Gnosticism. It basically said that physical things were bad, but enlightenment and life came through knowledge.

Now, I find this very interesting as a Westerner in the 21st century. We live in the so-called age of information and algorithms and big data. Journalists speak about the influence of 'knowledge

workers' and the knowledge economy. We are literally the most knowledgeable society to walk the face of the earth. And the future supposedly belongs to knowledge workers (a retreat of Gnostic elitism).

Now all of these trends in knowledge are interesting when compared with another fact I heard recently. A recent study found that 50% of Americans describe themselves as burned-out, on a fast track to burnout, or regularly exhausted. Knowledge cannot save us. Gnosticism never went away.

We are literally obsessed with knowledge in our culture, but few are speaking about *wisdom*. Here's some wisdom about knowledge from Hugh of St Victor, a Benedictine monk living in the 1200s:

The number of books is infinite; don't pursue infinity! Where no end is in sight, there can be no rest. Where there is no rest, there is no peace. Where there is no peace, God cannot dwell. ¹

Interlude: Two Features of Wisdom

Instead of this false gospel of salvation by knowledge for a few, select elites, Paul offers *everyone* the Gospel of Jesus: Christ in you, the hope of glory. Not the power of man-made knowledge, but 'the mystery hidden for ages and generations,' the wisdom of the cross, Christ reconciling the nations to himself. And not just reconciliation, but **growth** in wisdom.

Paul says we proclaim Christ (v. 28), "warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ." Notice the threefold repetition of 'everyone' here. A subtle poke in the eye to Gnostic elitism. How personal, how pastoral. Each person has a summons to increase in wisdom and mature in Christ Jesus.

What would it look for each person to pursue the wisdom of Christ in our time? We'll look at this question again in a few weeks' time, because Paul addresses this further with the Colossians. But I'd like to take cues from Paul's Colossian letter and suggest two features of wisdom for the remainder of my remarks: seeing Christ in creation and ordering 'all the things' of life for the sake of Christ.

¹ Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalicon*, 5.7

The Cathedral of Creation

How do I pursue wisdom? Go outside and look for Jesus. Creation is a cathedral—a temple to worship Jesus, through whom the Father made all things. Jump back to verse 16: Paul opened his letter saying that all things were created through Jesus and for him...in him all things hold together. So go outside and look for Jesus.

A popular topic among parents and teachers these days regarding their kids is screen time. I say take kids outside and teach them to find Christ in creation. It is one thing to say that we—kids and adults—don't want to become addicted to devices. That's a defensive stance. Stir the God-given desires for wonder and glory instead. We were made to see his presence and his glory in his world *as God intended us to see and find him there.*

The French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." Teach yourself and others to yearn for Christ in his vast and glorious creation.

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" wrote the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. And though we have scarred and polluted God's good world, Hopkins still believes, "For all this, nature is never spent; There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings."

Speaking of bright things, just walk outside at dusk on these July evenings and marvel at the wonder of fireflies, especially if they gather in a copse of trees. Then think of John's Prologue about Jesus which says 'and the Light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.' Ten years ago I sat on my back porch in August with an English friend who came to visit Emily and me. Fireflies were out and he hadn't seen them before. I told him about how the back half of a firefly's body lights up and he said, "That's why I love Jesus."

Look at the heavens, as well, whether day or night, and think how everything is *moving* around light. The Earth is in constant motion, the planets are constantly moving. Now combine truth in astronomy with our conviction of the Trinity. We believe that God is an unceasing movement of love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What is the glory of the Trinity? Unceasing, self-giving love—constant movement to the Other. That's who God is, that's how he desires *us* to be, and the movements of planets are one sign in the physical world of that spiritual truth.

The oak tree teaches me that growth happens slowly, more slowly than I desire, but with slow growth comes great strength and a stable trunk to withstand storms. In the dogwood, I find a picture of the cross. In the morning dew, I see an image of Jesus' constant gentleness, a picture of his mercy that is new every morning.

We become wise, not from more information, but combining our learning with constant praise of Christ in the wonder of creation. In 2:3 Paul says, “in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” So seek Christ’s hiddenness in creation.

I’ll give Hopkins the final word before on this point:

Glory be to God for dappled things—
For skies of couple-color as a branded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim. /
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: Praise Him.²

Wisdom Places Things in Order: Mary and Martha

Secondly, to become wise in Christ in our time means that we will learn how to put things in their proper order. God created the world with beautiful order and harmony. So his image-bearers, his adopted sons and daughters will order things well and gain a heart of wisdom.

In the story we heard from Luke 10 today, we hear the Lord Jesus teaching Martha the way of wisdom. ‘One thing is necessary, Martha.’ To sit, to learn, to worship at the feet of Jesus. This is the beginning and end of all wisdom. More precepts of wisdom you may acquire, but this is the one thing necessary.

To grow wise in Christ in our age days means we must learn **the art of holy subtraction**. ‘Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about *many things*.’ We are like Martha, racing to complete our checklists, yet we don’t notice what we sacrifice in the process: the gift of our attention.

Several writers have described our time as an age of distraction. To become wise in an age of distraction means learning what is absolutely necessary for faithfulness to Christ, and practicing holy subtraction with what is not. We must learn to embrace our limits—the limits in our bodies, our minds, and our souls. The attention you give to God in prayer; to your family in conversation; to your neighbor is a precious and holy gift.

² Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty”

So resist the cult of speed, the metronome of daily hurry, the endless alerts and notifications, and remember 'one thing is necessary.' For that one thing—your presence and attention with Christ—is the key to wisdom and spiritual maturity.

This past week would have been my grandfather's 102nd birthday. In my grandparents dining room there was a cross-stitched rendering of Deuteronomy 33.25 which says, "As thy days, so shall thy strength be." These were the words that Jacob spoke at the end of his life, a father's blessing of wisdom for his son, Asher.

That cross-stitched frame now hangs in our home and it has become a regular prompt of self-examination for me. Has this day been grounded in wisdom? Not a few days I feel a call to confess the sin of hurry.

And then I think about my grandfather's desk calendar I saw shortly after his death. He recorded the weather of the day and his work projects for the day, maybe a church meeting if it was a Sunday or Wednesday.

He didn't record daily prayer times, but he always arose before dawn with my grandmother, beginning the day in Scripture and prayer with her. His days were filled with good worship, good work (he was a builder), good neighbors and friends, and good books and conversation when the day was done. And just a little *Murder She Wrote*. We called Angela Lansbury his girlfriend.

His was not an exciting life, but he was faithful to his family and his community for 98 years. "As thy days, so shall thy strength be."

Conclusion

Today is a good day to take the first step to maturity. And that is to ask that the Lord would make us wise each day, so that we grow up to full maturity in Christ over the years. For this is the one thing needful—to be with Him, to look for Him in creation, to worship Him with the Father and Holy Spirit, one God, forevermore. Amen.