



The Ministry of Agony

[2:1-5]

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“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 in order that no one may 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” (2:1-5).

In Luke’s chilling description of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His death, he writes, “And being in agony [*agōnia*] He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Luke 22:44). Jesus was in great anguish of heart and soul that night in the Garden. That agony drove Him to pray to His Father in heaven for courage to go on to Calvary.

With that in mind, hear the writer to the Hebrews: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race [*agōn*] that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1). This race is no 100-yard dash. It is a marathon, a long distance race that calls for perseverance. It is a race so long that your lungs

gasp for air to go on, your sides are splitting with pain, screaming for you to quit rather than force yourself to take another step. Your legs feel like cement, trembling beneath you, threatening to give out altogether. That explains why the word translated “race” is the Greek word *agōn*.

These passages in Luke and Hebrews prepare us to listen to the words of Paul in Colossians 2:1: “For I want you to know how great a struggle [*agōn*] I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face.” Again we meet our word *agōn*, this time translated “how great a struggle.” This is an intense word suggesting blood, sweat, toil, and tears. Paul was saying, “I am in agony continually for you Colossians and for the believers over in Laodicea and even for all those believers I have heard about but have never met.”

Where was this agony coming from? Was it the agony of traveling under primitive conditions to a new continent to share Jesus? Was it the agony of being run out of another town for preaching Jesus as God’s Messiah? Was it the agony of facing another shipwreck or another riot? Not at all. All those were now physically impossible for Paul, for he was in prison. He was chained night and day to a Roman soldier. Whatever he achieved, whatever he endured, he had to do it sitting still. The agony, the anguish Paul experienced was in his *prayer* life.

Paul was not alone in this agony. He said, “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bond-

slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly [*agōnizomai*] for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (4:12).

"Laboring earnestly" is the translation of the one Greek word *agōn*. Paul and Epaphras did not just pray. They agonized in intercessory prayer for these Christians at Colossae. Most likely, Paul had not even met these brethren. But like Jacob at the Jabbok River, Paul and Epaphras wrestled with God and would not let Him go day after day until they were assured of a divine blessing for these Christians.

Do you agonize over anyone in prayer? Do you know what it is to work hard in prayer, like a wrestler in the Olympian games, struggling to win? Have you ever interceded for another so diligently that you were literally drained of energy when you got through praying for him?

Maybe the reason we do not get done for God what Paul got done for Him is that we do not have the passion Paul had. We pray, but we do not agonize. We pray, but we do not wrestle. We love the church's programs and ministries, but we do not have a burning passion for people. When at last our hearts ache to see transformed lives rather than to find fault with other Christians, we will be driven to pray as Paul prayed.

Are you a "prayer warrior"? Do you engage regularly in sustained, importunate, courageous, intercessory prayer for other believers?

Think about Paul, chained to that Roman soldier—what a great excuse not to pray! He could claim bodily weariness, pain, or inconvenience. But he wrestled with all these things, and he was not to be overcome. He *would* pray! Too much was at stake for him not to pray!

But who of us does this today? Could you sit down, write a note to another Christian, and honestly say, "I want you to know how much I'm agonizing for you in prayer"? The church can be assured of this: Until you and I get the passion, we will not get the power!

Paul said that he agonized over four things in prayer for these Christians.

HIS PASSIONATE PRAYER FOR THEIR ENCOURAGEMENT (2:2)

First, *he prayed passionately that these believers would be encouraged*: "That their hearts may be encouraged" (2:2a). To understand the emotion

behind these words we need to look at another text in which Paul described some of the burdens he carried in life. The list is almost incredible.

Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

Here was the cause of Paul's anguish. Here was why Paul agonized in prayer. Believers were living in communities that were not friendly to faith in Jesus. The way of holiness was being assailed. Daily, these folks were being pressured by family and friends to renounce Christianity, to lower their standards, to go back to their old way of living. Paul knew it would take courage to go out into the marketplace and stand up for Jesus. He told the Colossians that he was praying passionately that they would experience this inner encouragement to be faithful to the gospel to which they had committed themselves.

People do fall away from fellowship with the Lord. Think of the families you know who used to worship with you but now go elsewhere or, in many cases, nowhere at all! What happened? They lost their inner encouragement. They gave up on the idea that the church was a place for them. Perhaps few spoke to them after church. Perhaps few ever invited them over for dinner. Perhaps no one was passionately interceding for them and holding them up before God, and they lost heart. It was easier to drop out than to keep on trying.

Those of us who have been faithful for eight, ten, or twelve years will keep attending regardless of what happens. We have an emotional stake in the church. But not new Christians. If they become discouraged because they are not developing meaningful relationships in the local fellowship, they will continue to drop out. To

attract people to Jesus and to His body, we must become passionately concerned about people. We will have to struggle for their faithfulness, just as Paul struggled for the faithfulness of the Colossian brethren.

Do you believe that? If so, then intercessory prayer must become your ministry of agony.

HIS PASSIONATE PRAYER FOR LOVE (2:2)

Paul also agonized over a loving union in the church fellowship. He said, "Having been knit together in love" (2:2b). This is really the basis for the fulfillment of Paul's passion for encouragement. What is more encouraging to a Christian than finding a loving fellowship of Christians? Can you think of anything more discouraging to a Christian than being a part of a fellowship of Christians who do not care for one another, who spread critical remarks, who gossip and complain about one another?

Notice that Paul said he was in agony for these Colossians that they be united in love. He did not say he was in agony until they were united in doctrine, united in their beliefs, or united in what the elders were leading the church to do. We will probably never be completely in agreement on those things because we are all in different places in our spiritual pilgrimage as we attempt to understand the Bible. But right from the beginning of our spiritual pilgrimage, we can be united in love.

Love is the cement that binds us together when we disagree. Love is the salve that heals and forgives when someone hurts us. Love for one another is the glue that keeps us together when Satan tries his best to destroy our fellowship. Before this letter was completed, Paul told them:

And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity (3:12-14).

Why is a Christian compassionate? Because he loves. Why does a Christian forgive another Christian when he is hurt by him? Because he loves. That is why Paul says love is the quality that binds all the virtues of the Christian life

together and makes it possible for them to be practiced in the body of Christ. Jesus once said, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The love of which Jesus spoke and for which Paul agonized in prayer for these Christians was not some kind of sentimental love. The love of which they spoke is a costly love as we seek to express it in our relationship with one another. Sometimes this love may require a sacrifice of something one owns or possesses, or perhaps more importantly, it may require a sacrifice of time to meet the needs of another Christian.

This love is not something felt. It is not abstract. Rather it is something that can be seen in our dealings with each other that Jesus says will convince the world that we truly are His disciples.

This kind of tangible, costly love that glues people together no matter how great their differences may be is what Paul agonized for in prayer. Do you agonize to help form a community of Christians that is knit together in tremendous love for each other?

Let me encourage you to do something for the Lord Jesus Christ. When you hear a Christian say something to another person that is not loving or encouraging, point that out to him. If you see a Christian treat another Christian (or even an unbeliever) in an unloving way, bring that to his attention. Some of us have said and done some unloving things for so long that we do not even realize the impact of what we are doing.

What a difference it would make in the Lord's church if everyone were committed to working hard to knit our fellowship together in love! What an attractive force we would become in the community.

HIS PASSIONATE PRAYER FOR THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS (2:2, 3)

Paul agonized for the Colossians and the Laodiceans and all who had not seen his face as he *passionately interceded for them that they would know Christ*. "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" (2:2c, 3). Paul did not pray that they would *know more about Jesus* but that they might *know Jesus*.

Paul told Timothy: "For this reason I also suffer these things, but I am not ashamed; for I know *whom* I have believed [not "*what* I have believed"] and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (2 Timothy 1:12; emphasis mine). Great security in your Christian life comes not from knowing doctrines about Jesus but rather in knowing Jesus. Of course, as you get to know Jesus you will get to know more about Him. But it is that close, intimate relationship with your Lord and Savior that will inspire you to live faithfully for Him.

I would not suffer for the truth of the fact that the former Maxine MacKay is my wife. But I am willing to suffer for the relationship I have with her as my wife. Do you understand the difference? Lamar Hunt is the owner of the Kansas City Chiefs. That is a fact, but it does not do anything for me because I do not know Lamar Hunt. Facts do not empower us. Relationships do. Paul agonized in prayer on behalf of all Christians that they would know Jesus Christ in a more personal way. When that happens to us, we will know how to make lifestyle decisions.

Someone may come to my office and ask me, "Is it all right to play the state lottery?" What he means is, "Can you show me in the Bible why playing the state lottery is wrong?" We may debate the merits of playing the lottery. But it becomes an altogether different issue if I ask in response to their question, "What do you think Jesus wants you to do?" It is one thing to argue verses of the Bible; it is something else to make decisions based on your relationship with Jesus Christ.

William Temple was proud of what he had learned and wanted to share with his mother many of his philosophical insights. When he finished, he asked his mother how she could keep her faith in Jesus when she could not answer the questions he had concerning religion. She replied, "You may know more than I do, but I know better than you do."

Christ is the key to all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The simplest Christian who knows Christ knows more than the greatest philosopher who ever lived. Get to know Jesus, and you will have the insight you need to understand what life is all about. From that relationship with Jesus, you will discover how to make right decisions in your daily living that bring no regrets.

HIS PASSIONATE PRAYER FOR THEIR SPIRITUAL STABILITY (2:4, 5)

Paul was passionately concerned that Christians be spiritually grounded. "I say this in order that no one may 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" (2:4, 5).

More Christians will be destroyed through Satan's religious lies than will be destroyed by a barrel of whiskey. Satan's major strategy against the church is to lead people astray by getting them to accept religious lies as truth. He is doing a splendid job of it too.

Have you heard any of these statements?

"Attend the church of your choice."

"It doesn't matter what you believe so long as you are sincere."

"God is too loving for there to be such a place as hell."

"We're all going our different ways, but we're all going to end up in heaven."

Those are fine-sounding arguments, but they are lies that will cost people their souls if they accept and practice them. Paul realized that all kinds of religious deceptions are in the world, many that lead even Christians astray. Therefore, he wrestled in prayer for the churches that Christians would not buy into the religious lies of their day.

We ought to be concerned about the spiritual welfare of every Christian. The passion of our heart ought to be to see our brethren grounded in their faith in Jesus. That would motivate us to give the time to teach a Bible class, lead a home Bible study group, pray with other Christians, or write a note of spiritual encouragement to some family. Helping others like that would stoke the fires of dedication and help them remain faithful to the Lord.

CONCLUSION

Are you involved at all in the ministry of agony? Do you have a passion for your brethren? Praise God, if you do! You are helping Jesus create the spiritual community He desires on the earth. The church needs more people like you. Your godly attitude and spiritual encouragement are a real blessing to the fellowship of believers.