Christ in you – the hope of Glory
Colossians 1:21-2:5

What does it mean for something to be *plausible*? In v4 Paul tells these Christians in Colossae that he doesn't want them being led down a dead end by people persuading them with 'plausible arguments.'

And something's plausible if it makes sense to you, if it fits with the way you see the world. And so if someone's talking to you about finding meaning in life, or how you get the most out of life, and you hear them and think, 'yeh, that sounds reasonable, that could make sense of my life', then it's plausible.

The problem is that something can be plausible and still not be true, can't it? I mean I could tell you that I can run 10k in under 45 minutes, or that I cook an amazing aubergine and leak gratin, and both sound plausible, but neither are true. And the same is true for how you see faith and spirituality in the world. The American sociologist, Peter Berger, coined the term *plausibility structures* – to describe those things that make faith, or the way you find meaning in the world, plausible, why believing or not believing make sense to you.

And as Paul writes to these guys, and to us, he knows that he's speaking into a space that's contested: that plenty of other people are out there offering you an alternative vision of life that seems plausible – one that's built on your personal freedom, or this life being all there is, or getting as much as you can, or sleeping with as many people as you can. And so Paul's not just calling them, or us, to a different lifestyle, but to a different vision of reality. A reality, a world, where Christ is Lord over everything.

And that world is one in which your life can genuinely change for the better, where true meaning in life lies much deeper than your personal comfort, and where someone much greater than you takes centre stage.

Amazing Change
Now, do you like before and after pictures? Someone buys a house, and before, it's a wreck. But then they do it up, and now… it's this beautiful, dream house. Or, have you ever noticed the adverts for cures for male baldness? Before – he looks like a ping-pong ball, but now, having liberally massaged his scalp with the product, he's got this field growing on his head. Or the latest fitness program. Before – you're weak and weedy – but after, you'll be fighting the women off.

And we fall for it! Because we like the idea of change. We don't like the way things are now, so if something promises us that things can be different, and it sounds good, it sounds *plausible*, we go for it.

So look at the change Paul says happens when someone becomes a Christian. Verse 21: 'You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds…' And that's the *before* picture. And to be alienated from someone is not good, is it? You hear about someone alienated from their children, and they haven't talked for years, and you think, that's bad. But think how much worse it is to be alienated from God. To be cut off from the ultimate source of love and life and light, with no access to him, no conversation with him, and for the consequences of that alienation to grow steadily worse.

Or think about the second way Paul describes this *before* picture: 'hostile in mind.' Now, you know what it means for two people or two nations to be hostile to each other, and there's this simmering, underlying conflict. And Paul says that someone who's not yet a Christian is hostile in their mind, in their thinking, towards God. And someone might hear that and think, 'no I'm not, I might not be a Christian, but I'm actually quite in favour of God'. But it all depends on what image of God you have, doesn't it, whether he's the real God, the God with a claim on your ultimate allegiance, or a God you've made in your own image.

And those two characteristics of *before*, alienated from God, and hostile to God result in us doing evil deeds, Paul says. Which just compounds the problem, as they further cut us off from God. In other words, whilst on the outside our lives might look all neat and tidy, on the inside, when it comes to our relationship with God, we're like that ruined house.

So what can bring about the change we need? And for those of us who are already Christians, what has brought about that change? Because Paul says this is what we once were, but now… and Paul describes the after picture: v22, you 'he has now reconciled… in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.' Once you were alienated and at war with God, but now you're reconciled and at peace with him. Once you were marked as one who does evil deeds, but now God sees you as holy, blameless, and above reproach.

So what can achieve that kind of makeover in your life?

In 1893 the Parliament of World Religions took place in Chicago, and representatives of every major religion gathered to set out their beliefs: Catholics and Protestants and Orthodox and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and Zoroastrians and Shintoists and Confucians and everyone was given the opportunity to say 'this is what our faith offers'. And a man called Joseph Cook spoke for Christianity. And standing among all these other religions he took them to Shakespeare's Macbeth. And Macbeth and his wife have murdered the Duncan, the King of Scotland, so they can take the throne for themselves. But almost immediately, Macbeth's conscience plagues him. He sees Duncan's blood on his hands and says, 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' But at first Lady Macbeth has no such qualms, until she too begins to crumble under the weight of her guilt, and walking her rooms at night it's as if she sees the blood on her hands: 'Out damned spot! Out, I say!... Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.'

And before all those representatives, Joseph Cook said, 'I take Lady Macbeth on my right arm and her husband on my left and walk among you now. Which of all these great religions can wash their hands clean?' And who can wash your conscience clean? Who can take away our stain of sin and guilt? Can Islam, or Hinduism, or Buddhism? And then he said, 'But now I turn to the Bible, and I read 'the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin.'

So look at v21-22 again, 'And you, who once were alienated and hostile… he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death.' And Jesus stood in our place

and absorbed all of God's wrath against our alienation and hostility and deeds, so that we might be reconciled. That's how this amazing change comes about.

And that's why Paul doesn't want them, or you, sliding off that foundation because something else sounds plausible. Look at v23, this before and after picture is true of you, 'If indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard.' Su and I did pre-marriage prep this week with a young couple getting married in the Summer, and we were chatting about how, if you want to keep the marriage and romance alive, you've got to invest in it, you've got to stick with it, you never walk away thinking there's something better.

And Paul's saying the same: that the indication that this before and after is really true of you is that you won't shift from the good news of all Jesus has done for you. Other stuff might look attractive, or even sound plausible, but only Christ is solid rock to build your life on.

And one reason you need solid rock to stand on is that it's not just you who's broken, the world is too.

Suffering Service

Now these Colossians have never met Paul. And they've never downloaded his sermons or read his blog. They only know him second hand. But even if they had met him they might not have been that impressed – because we know that others who did meet him didn't think he was an especially good speaker: great on paper, but not that special in person. So when Paul talks about himself it's fascinating what he says. Because no doubt they've got guys with big personalities telling them, 'sure Jesus is good, but if you really want to flourish you need this…' and it all sounded plausible.

So Paul says, v24, 'Now I rejoice in my *sufferings* for your sake.' In other words, he does the opposite of what you might expect from someone trying to sell you a message. He doesn't tell them how great he is, he tells them about the stuff that others might think made him unsuitable or ineffective. His suffering.

Now, when life is going badly, do you rejoice, or complain? When things are hard, and we're suffering, we tend to turn in on ourselves, don't we? So how come Paul rejoices? Well, you can find joy when life is hard when you know that something is more valuable than you having a pain free life, can't you? And in Acts, when Peter and John were beaten by the Sanhedrin, they left rejoicing, not because it didn't hurt, but because they had been counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus.

But you can also rejoice when life is hard when you know that your suffering is achieving something. And in Romans Paul tells us that God uses suffering for our growth, to develop Christ-like character in us. And you know that's true in your own life, don't you. I was talking to someone this week and we agreed that whether it's been stuff outside our control, or stuff we've brought on ourselves through our bad choices, God has used difficulty and knocks and even humiliation, for our growth.

But here Paul gives us another reason for rejoicing in suffering: v24, 'In my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.' Now, how can there be anything lacking in what Christ has suffered for the church? Well, let's be clear, there is nothing lacking in Christ's sufferings on our behalf. At the cross Jesus did everything. Our every sin forgiven. Our past wiped clean. Our lives reconciled. Our enemy's power broken. How could anything be lacking when Jesus cried out, 'It is finished!'?

So what is lacking that Paul can fill up through his suffering? Well, not everyone knows, or trusts, what Christ has done for them. The message still needs to get out. And it's into that lack that Paul steps, and if being beaten, or stoned, or imprisoned for Jesus results in more people hearing that Jesus has done everything they need, then Paul's glad to suffer.

I don't know if you've heard about Jordan Peterson, the Canadian psychologist who's causing such a stir with his seminars encouraging young men to take responsibility, but I read another article about him this week. And it detailed some of the attacks he's facing from left and right. Now, if Peterson is willing to take some flack for a message that basically tells men to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, why shouldn't Paul, or you and I gladly do the same for the honour of telling others about Jesus?

And so in v29 and 2:1 Paul describes his ministry as 'toil… [and] struggle'. And apparently those words are taken from the world of athletics. So for Paul, Christian ministry is like running the 10 or 20k day after day. And he happily puts in the effort to see the message go out. But sometimes it's more agony than ecstasy. And sometimes dealing with brokenness and opposition can be sapping. And he gets slandered and criticised and alongside the schemes of the enemy he faces his own temptations. And how easily disillusionment and discouragement could set in. And yet, he keeps going.

So what kept him going? What was the fuel in his tank that kept him persevering? Well, look at v29 again, 'For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.' Now, when you take your car to work, do you stand outside the car, and push it? Or do you get in, turn the ignition, and let the engine and fuel do its work? And Paul knew all about the brokenness of life, and he knew only too well that he was just a vessel of clay, but he also knew the resurrection, life-from-the-dead power of God working inside him. And rather than burn out, he let that power burn within him. Now that didn't mean his suffering didn't feel like suffering. It did. But it meant he could embrace the brokenness of the world, and keep going.

Ok, but what's that got to do with you? Well, it's this. In v28 Paul describes his ministry as 'warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom.' But later on, in chapter 3v16 he says that everyone of us has exactly the same ministry: 'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom.' So as we do life together, as we share our faith out there in the world, there are going to be great times and hard times, but you can't properly handle either in your own strength. If you're to take up your cross and

follow Jesus, and embrace the brokenness of the world without either burning out or breaking up, you need his power. And he gives it.

Because God doesn't promise us a life of ease. He promises us Christ.

A Glorious Message

Look at v25-26, where Paul describes what God's entrusted to him: 'To make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to the saints.' Now what do you think of when you hear the word *mystery*? A murder mystery? Someone get's killed and you have to work out *who dunnit*? But what did these Colossians think when they heard that word? You see, around this time, the ideas of Gnosticism were probably just beginning to emerge; and part of Gnosticism was the belief that there was some special spiritual knowledge, some secret mystery, known only to a select few, and if you really wanted to enjoy spiritual fullness, if you really wanted to flourish in life, you needed those special keys, you needed to be initiated into these spiritual mysteries.

But that's not the mystery of God, Paul says. The divine mystery is not something clouded in unknowing, it's God's unfolding plan of salvation for the whole world.

You see, imagine living around 0BC, and standing at the crossroads of history, and looking backwards down into history. As you reviewed how God had intervened in the world so far, what would you think? Wouldn't you wonder, 'God, what are you up to?' What did you mean that the seed of woman will crush the serpent's head, but himself be bruised? What did you mean when you told Abraham that through his offspring all nations would be blessed? And what's the meaning of all the animal sacrifices, and all the blood, and you dwelling in a tent and a temple? And what's with the promise of a king who'll rule for ever? And why a servant who will suffer? And what's any of that got to do with you turning back the curse of the Fall?

But Paul says that the curtain has now been pulled back, the mystery has been revealed. And it's not a timeline of events, it's a person: v28, '*Him* we proclaim'; chapter 2v2, '… God's mystery, *which is Christ*.'

And not Christ in some abstract, theoretical sense. Not Christ as a bunch of theological propositions – but Christ in dynamic, personal relationship with you. Verse 27, 'The riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.' That's what God's been up to. That what all the prophecies and sacrifices and symbols were about. That Christ would give his life for us, so that instead of dwelling in tents and temples, God might come and live in us by his Spirit. So it doesn't matter what anyone else is offering you, Paul says, it doesn't matter how plausible it all sounds, Christ is what God is up to – and by his Spirit, you have him.

And in him, Paul says in v3, 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' All that you need to live life, and please God, and flourish and thrive – they're all yours in Christ.

But what if they, or you, are thinking, 'yes but surely there must be more than what I'm experiencing now. I mean, is this it?' And Paul's response would be, no this is not it, firstly because we have plenty of growing and maturing in him to do. But secondly because God's mystery is 'Christ in you, *the hope of glory*.' And there is infinitely more of God and Christ to experience, but that lies up ahead. And if you think you can experience and know everything now, in this life, you'll go searching for one spiritual high after another, but each one will end in disillusionment.

Instead, it's like running a race. I was talking to some of the guys who ran the 10k last Sunday – and to start with it feels great, but then you hit the hill and you look at the way markers and you're not even half-way, and it's agony, but then you get over the dip and you begin to feel good again, and you get back into your stride. But you never get to feel that final thrill of victory, of crossing the finish line, of celebration and joy, until you cross the finish line. And the ultimate prize of life, the ultimate experience of God in Christ, is not for now, it's for when you finish the race. It's the hope of glory, that keeps you running to the end.

And the joy of experiencing Christ in you now, and that hope of glory up ahead, is for everyone. Verse 28, 'Him we proclaim, warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ.' You see, the mystery religions of Gnosticism taught that there were only a privileged few who knew the secret. And if you really wanted to know the truth to human flourishing you had to be initiated into that select few. And any number of sects and religions make the same claim today, don't they. That to progress, you need this knowledge that only we can give you; or that there's an elite, who *really* know. And there's something appealing about that, isn't there. We like the idea of being on the inside, among the special, privileged few.

But Christianity is very different – there's no elite, inner circle from which you're excluded or admitted. It's for everyone, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, top of the pile or bottom of the heap, everyone can become all they were created to be, in Christ.

And that's why Paul is willing to suffer. It's why he warns us not to fall for anything else. Because it's only Christ who can take your life from the wreckage and transform it into something beautiful. It's only Christ who can bring joy and fullness to life now, and give you a hope that keeps you going to the end. And it's only in Christ that you'll find all wisdom and knowledge that nothing else, however plausible, can hope to match.