

Is It Enough?

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

July 23 & 24, 2016

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Psalm 85:8–13 (CEB)

⁸Let me hear what the LORD God says,
because he speaks peace to his
people
and to his faithful ones.
Don't let them return to foolish
ways.

⁹God's salvation is very close
to those who honor him
so that his glory can live in our
land.

¹⁰Faithful love and truth have met;
righteousness and peace have
kissed.

¹¹Truth springs up from the ground;
righteousness gazes
down from heaven.

¹²Yes, the LORD gives what is good,
and our land yields its produce.

¹³Righteousness walks before God,
making a road for his steps.

Luke 11:5–13 (CEB)

⁵He also said to them, "Imagine that one of you has a friend and you go to that friend in the middle of the night. Imagine saying, 'Friend, loan me three loaves of bread' ⁶because a friend of mine on a journey has arrived and I have nothing to set before him.' ⁷Imagine further that he answers from within the house, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can't get up to give you anything.' ⁸I assure you, even if he wouldn't get up and help because of his friendship, he will get up and give his friend whatever he needs because of his friend's brashness. ⁹And I tell you: Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰Everyone who asks, receives. Whoever seeks, finds. To everyone who knocks, the door is opened.

¹¹"Which father among you would give a snake to your child if the child asked for a fish? ¹²If a child asked for an egg, what father would give the child a scorpion? ¹³If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Colossians 2:6–15 (CEB)

⁶So live in Christ Jesus the Lord in the same way as you received him. ⁷Be rooted and built up in him, be established in faith, and overflow with thanksgiving just as you were taught. ⁸See to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception, which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ. ⁹All the fullness of deity lives in Christ's body. ¹⁰And you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹You were also circumcised by him. This wasn't performed by human hands—the whole body was removed through this circumcision by Christ. ¹²You were buried with him through baptism and raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³When you were dead because of the things you had done wrong and because your body wasn't circumcised, God made you alive with Christ and forgave all the things you had done wrong. ¹⁴He destroyed the record of the debt we owed, with its requirements that worked against us. He canceled it by nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵When he disarmed the rulers and authorities, he exposed them to public disgrace by leading them in a triumphal parade.

Is Jesus enough? Is the cross really enough?

I once knew as much about ATMs and debit cards as nearly anyone in the country. The company I led at the time was one of the largest operators in the U.S. I was a key witness in a landmark antitrust arbitration here in Texas and was an expert witness for the Canadian government in an antitrust action against the large banks in Canada. My point in saying all this is whenever I heard reporters and others outside the business comment on the industry, they usually didn't know what they were talking about. I'm sure they were smart and well-educated people, but they were still too ignorant to be very helpful.

Sadly, I think America is becoming increasingly ignorant of the most basic teachings of the Christian faith. We've talked for years here about the growth of a competing "christianity" – similar in name and form to the real thing, but still a fraud. Further, there has been an unending stream of competing gospels, each telling its own story of how we can be rescued, what we must do to save the planet or save ourselves, build a world of peace and harmony, and so on.

Since humans have always had a tendency to believe that the answer lies within themselves, Paul faced much the same problem in his day. People put their trust in many complicated schemes by which they might get right with the gods and indulged in much deep thinking about the whole thing. So Paul wrote the Christians in Colossae and urged them to "see to it that nobody enslaves you with philosophy and foolish deception, which conform to human traditions and the way the world thinks and acts rather than Christ" (Col. 2:8). Paul had worked mightily against a competing gospel in Galatia – embrace the Law of Moses if you want to be a true follower of Jesus, the opponents said . . . Paul didn't even try to be nice to the pushers of that fraud. Similarly, in Colossae there are some who wanted to add-on this and that to the simple gospel of Christ. Paul would have none of it.

So he reiterates what he said earlier in 1:19 – "All the fullness of deity lives in Christ's body" (Col 2:9, CEB), or in the NRSV, "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." And then without even pausing, Paul goes right on to say, "you have been filled by him, who is the head of every ruler and authority." N.T. Wright illuminates these simple but world-altering verses for us:

What he means, simply, is that Jesus was and is not simply a fully human being (though he is); not simply a man remarkably 'full of God' (though he's that as well). He was and is the bodily form taken by God himself, God in all his fullness. He isn't a demigod, half divine and half human. He doesn't have a human body and a divine spirit, or mind. He can only be properly understood as the human being who *embodies*, or 'incarnates', the fullness of divinity.

This meant, of course, that all the pagan deities and divinities were at once upstaged. The pagan world sometimes spoke of demigods, or heroes who became divine around the time of their death. Jesus wasn't like that. He was the real thing. But it also meant that Paul was cutting the ground away from any potential attack from the Jewish side. Jews, including Paul himself, believed that God was one. Many, perhaps Paul himself in his pre-Christian days, would have said that therefore Jesus couldn't be divine; that the best that could be said of his followers, particularly the ex-pagan ones, was that they should now go on to discover the true God, the creator, the sovereign Lord of all. Not so, says Paul: if you want to find the true God, you need look no further than Jesus himself. Verse 9 is perhaps the sharpest and clearest statement in all his writings of his belief that Jesus quite literally embodies the one true God, God in all his fullness.

If you possess Jesus, therefore, you are already 'fulfilled' in him, and no rule or authority can go, as it were, over his head and impose itself on you. He *is* the head of them all. The church in our own day still needs to recapture that vision of the supremacy of King Jesus over all other authority.¹

If you start with this claim, that Jesus embodies fully the Creator of all that is, then the rest of Paul's claims begin to fall into place. How could we need anyone other than Jesus? To say that there is a way to go to God that doesn't include Jesus is illogical. To say that Jesus is not enough is to say that God is not enough! Jesus is sufficient in all things, for all things. His grace is sufficient. His love is sufficient. As Paul would say elsewhere, we can endure all things through the power of him who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13).

¹ Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon* (pp. 167–168). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

But Paul doesn't stop even there. He wants us to grasp that in a very real way, we have already died with Jesus and been resurrected with him (v. 12). Already, we are new creations. Already, we have been born anew. Already, forgiveness is ours. All this because Jesus obliterated all our debts, our wrongs, our trespasses by nailing them to a cross. What powerful and direct words and phrases. Is Jesus enough? Is his grace sufficient for all things? The "yes" that is our answer, is the answer the world longs for but doesn't know it or won't hear it.

Of course, the cross looms over all this. New creation came at a price, such a terrible price. Sin and death were not defeated by sword or army, but by one man's willingness to faithful to God, even to death . . . death on a cross. Andrew Lincoln asks us to consider whether we are really ready to live by the proclamation Paul makes:

The challenge issued to the readers of Colossians is one that remains for Christians: Is this proclamation about Christ's death a metaphor by which we are prepared to live? Do we believe that this answer to the power of evil is really sufficient? The gospel proclaims that Christ has conquered evil; yet, evil still threatens and flourishes. So are additional means needed to cope with the reality of evil in our world? Presumably some of the original readers were tempted to turn to angelic powers for help for this very reason and thought this was compatible with their Christian faith. They reasoned that their confession of Jesus' lordship needed to be supplemented by other means of coping and bargaining with the forces of evil as they affected their daily lives. How far do contemporary Christians still make their own deals with other powers, whether materialism, rationalism, pragmatism, or violence, in order to live with the impact of evil on their lives and in society? For all readers of Colossians, a major test of authentic adherence to the gospel and to the confession of Christ as Lord is whether they are convinced enough of the sufficiency of God's action in the crucified Jesus to gamble their lives on the paradoxical power of the way of the cross rather than making compromises with other powers.²

The question of whether we are truly ready to live in the sufficiency of Christ is more

Why Paul?

I am sometimes asked why I talk so much about Paul and his New Testament letters. A fair question.

I am drawn to Paul by the nature of his work, his understanding of the Good News, and his faithfulness to God. Paul's vocation, given him by God, was to crisscross the Mediterranean founding Christian colonies across the Roman empire. He was founding churches and helping them grow. It may have been 2,000 years ago in a world far different from our own, but still, many of the problems and opportunities Paul had to deal with are the ones we deal with. Paul was helping new Christians and more mature Christians to grow in their discipleship and to grasp the enormity of the three-word statement: Jesus is Lord. He was helping them find their way to unity in the body of Christ. He was teaching them the full meaning and depth of the Christian proclamation so that they might withstand a hostile world and false teachers of the gospel. In the deepest sense, Paul was helping people to make their way into the people of God and, once there, to make their way toward God and one another . . . toward a genuine with-God life.

Paul's letters are the oldest writings we have about Jesus and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, people, particularly in television specials, will try to pit Paul against Jesus, as if Paul messed up the simple teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this metaphor will help. Imagine Jesus' life and teachings, his death and resurrection, to be a symphony composed by our Lord. You can think of Paul as that symphony's first great conductor. The music is Jesus' but Paul is the one who teaches the orchestra (yes, that is you and me) to play as one beautiful and skilled ensemble.

² Lincoln, A. T. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Colossians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 11, p. 628). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

pervasive than we might think. Another of the lectionary readings for this week is a parable from Jesus. It is about prayer and follows on the heels of the Lord's Prayer in Luke's gospel. Perhaps nothing reveals our deepest beliefs God and the sufficiency of Christ as does prayer. To make the parable as clear as possible, here is Peterson's rendering of the parable (from *The Message*):

Then he [Jesus] said, "Imagine what would happen if you went to a friend in the middle of the night and said, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread. An old friend traveling through just showed up, and I don't have a thing on hand.'

"The friend answers from his bed, 'Don't bother me. The door's locked; my children are all down for the night; I can't get up to give you anything.'

"But let me tell you, even if he won't get up because he's a friend, if you stand your ground, knocking and waking all the neighbors, he'll finally get up and get you whatever you need."

God as a sleepy friend? That is quite an image. What is Jesus' point here? Could he mean that we need to awaken God or that God will hear us only if we pound on the door long enough? Of course not. The inevitability of the sleepy friend's answer is part of the point. Of course God answers; that is not the problem. The problem doesn't lie with God; it lies with you and me. We are the ones who try to find ways to squeeze prayer into our busy schedule. We are the ones who pray only when we feel like it. We are the ones who get frustrated when we think that God isn't answering us (usually meaning, God isn't giving us what we think we want.)

Just pray

Jesus knows how easy it is for us to simply give up, how easy it is for our prayer lives to get shoved aside. In telling the parable, Jesus is teaching us that our prayer life requires dogged and persistent discipline. It isn't about knocking loudly enough to wake God up; it is about the ease with which we slink away from the door. Jesus' message is simple: Stick With It! Ask and it will be given. Seek and we'll find. Knock and the door will be opened. When the friend arrives at the door, he knows with certainty that, eventually, the door will be opened and he will be handed the bread he needs.

Why do so many of us find it difficult to pray with confident persistence? I believe that for many Christians, God just doesn't seem real enough. Metropolitan Bloom urges us to ask the right question of ourselves: "Is there in my experience a living God, as concrete, as real as my friends, my relatives, some-*one* and not some-*thing*, not a power, but a real person?"

It is a pretty straightforward thing for me to sit down with my brother and seek his help and understanding. I can see him. I can touch him. I can hear him. But coming to God requires a deeper understanding of reality. I must trust in things that are unseen and cannot be touched. For the ancients, this may not have been as difficult as it is for us moderns. Such trust is not what comes naturally to us. We have trouble truly trusting that God is every bit as real as our friends and relatives. Jesus is not simply a figure of the past, he is a person in the present. We don't simply learn *about* Jesus, we learn *from* him. It is easy for us to give a quick nod of the head to such claims, but we must learn to embrace them.

When I come to God, I am coming to someone as real and as concrete as my brother. When I come to God, I am coming to someone who loves me, who desires only the best for me, whom I can trust completely, who won't ever tire of listening to me. Jesus is the thorough embodiment of God – he is enough and more. Jesus is the essence of our lives; how can we not persist in our prayer, our discipleship, our love and care of others?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The sufficiency of Christ. What do you think that phrase might mean? When we claim that Jesus is enough what are we really saying? What does it mean in your own life and faith journey. What sort of things or efforts do we turn to instead of to Jesus? What does his canceling of our debts (sins) really mean to you day to day?
2. You might make a list of reasons for our lack of persistence in our prayer lives. In the study, I concentrated on our difficulty in truly embracing the reality of God, in understanding that God is every bit as real as our brother or sister. What other explanations help to account for our lack of persistence? Then you might discuss how we can overcome these challenges. Do you think this is more about tips and techniques or a change of heart and mind? Why? What are the implications of your answer?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Psalm 62 Trust in God at all times. God will not let us down.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Hosea 1:2-10 God calls Hosea (Hosea must be faithful to Gomer, a prostitute, just as God is faithful to his people, who insist on chasing after other gods.)</p>
<p>Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 We are confident because of what God has done for us, not what we have done.</p>	<p>Thursday, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 God's grace is enough</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Peter 1:3-4 God has given us everything we need in the knowing of his son.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

