Colossians 2:1-7 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea 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 God’s mystery, which is Christ, 3in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. 5For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. 6Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

This passage is mostly about assurance. It tells us what assurance is, how to get assurance and how to hang on to it. Assurance is the confident conviction that we are living in the power of God under the smile of God. It is an experience of expanding joy that is difficult to define but easy to recognize. It is what George Wade Robinson was experiencing when he wrote,

Loved with everlasting love, led by grace that love to know—

Spirit, breathing from above, Thou hast taught me it is so!

O this full and perfect peace, O this transport all divine—

In a love which cannot cease, I am His and He is mine.

John Wesley described the blessing of assurance as "living with a loose rein" by which I think he meant to compare life to that of a horse so in tune with the rider's desires and direction that there is little requirement for the corrective tug of the bit and more of the exhilaration of striding and doing what you were created to do.

Assurance is a glorious theme. But it is not where the passage begins. The passage begins with agony and we cannot fully enter into assurance without first understanding this agony. “I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you.” I use the term "agony" because as Paul writes this letter in the language of his day the word he uses for struggle at the opening of v.1 sounds just like our English word "agony." A very common use of this word in that culture was to describe an athletic contest or wrestling match. That sounds appropriate since we're in the season of the state wrestling tournament. At the very least Paul would have us know that whatever this agony involves it call forth the intensity of physical training and mental determination required of a wrestler.

Paul is getting very personal and specific here in ch 2. He closes the opening chapter with a general description of his work with people. He addresses disciples in the third person. Colossians 1:28 Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. The shift to the second person in the second chapter is striking in its tenderness. He lays bare his heart. He writes openly about his own struggles.

Colossians 2:1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face,
The agony he experiences on behalf of the Colossian fellowship and her sister churches is intense and he's not afraid to talk about it. But he sees a purpose for it. The word "that" at the beginning of v. 2 alerts us to that purpose. I agonize so that something may happen with you. I want you to experience the riches of full assurance. This pattern ("I agonize you thrive") is the pattern of love. It is the pattern that Jesus lived for us. He agonized so that we would thrive. Every Christian here is a servant to someone or some group of people. Friends have a friend, spouses have their mate, parents their children or grandchildren; teachers their students; soldiers have the members of their unit (buddies); missionaries their people group; Awana leaders their team; growth group and care cell leaders have the members of their group; Bible hour teachers their class; committee chairs the members of the committee; worship leaders the musicians on their team; pastors and elders have a flock.

The Holy Spirit focuses on Paul's example to remind us of Christ's ministry to us and to instruct us about what it will mean if we get serious about investing in others for His sake. When we look at Paul or more importantly at Christ we long to live with an "I agonize, you thrive" mentality.

So consider first that . . . In Ministry, Agony is Essential. Here in v. 1 Paul narrows his circle of service down to three churches. Two are named. One is the church at Colossae. He refers to them as "you." He then names the believers at Laodicea. This was a town in the same river valley just a few miles away. He also includes a more general reference to "all those who have not seen me face to face." It is likely that he is including a third church which he mentions in 4:13, Hieropolis, which was also close by and was planted by Epaphrus who helped to start all three churches.

Paul assures them that even though he has not been physically with them, his agony is for their blessing. They have been on his mind. He has been with them in spirit. And he thinks of them as churches because his concern is not simply for individuals but for the community. He agonizes so that churches can thrive. I can resonate with this sentiment. Grace is a growing church. There are many of you whom I have not met face to face. My ministry may seem impersonal to many of you. But my heart is for this whole body. We are a covenant community. No individual is expendable. I would that all would enter and extend the blessings of that covenant. The church is not a shopping mall filled with self-interested shoppers, we are a family working for the good of the whole.

Paul's Experience of Agony

Paul does not specifically name the agony that he suffers for these churches. He didn't have to. He makes references to them throughout the letter. And those who visited Paul returned with stories detailing Paul's agony. We can summarize his struggle for the church with five words:

First there is the agony of Prayer or:

1. Intercession

He began the letter referring his struggle for them in prayer: Colossians 1:9 “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you....” In ch 4 Paul refers to Epaphrus' agonizing in prayer: Colossians 4:12, “Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling [same word as 2.1] on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God.” It would be
most reasonable to assume that Paul not only witnessed this prayer ministry but joined in it as well.

Jesus modeled this same kind of agony in his prayer ministry for us. We know about his experience on the night before his crucifixion as he prayed in the Garden called Gethsemane. Luke 22:44, “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” But we may forget that among Jesus prayer concerns that night was his people. John 17:20-21, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

I have to admit that an observer would not look at my prayer ministry and say, "He agonizes in prayer for the people in his circle of service." Do the people in your circle of service know that you agonize for them in prayer? Last week James Kim said simply on Friday evening, "Intercession is hard work." It is like being in a wrestling match. Does our family of missionaries know that we as a church agonize for them in prayer? As we continue through the forty days of Seek God for the City, will we deepen our experience of wrestling for the blessing of our city. A second word that summarizes Paul's agony for the churches is the agony of:

2. Inconvenience

He could trace his connection to these churches through the missionary named Epaphrus. He discipled him while at Ephesus. But we know that to get to Ephesus and to minister there meant a great deal of inconvenience for the apostle. He encountered travel delays and conflicts finding a place to meet. He engaged in tiring ministry including teaching, miracles, and debate. This went on for three years. Ministry put Paul, 2 Corinthians 11:26-27, “… on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.” He endured all these things for the blessing of the churches.

Jesus did the same for his people. He left heaven to live among us. He said simply of himself, Matthew 8:20, “... ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ ” The spirit of our age lures us into thinking that the one thing we can demand of life and even ministry is convenience. We fit our service into the free time we may have left over when we have fine tuned our perfectly organized schedules. The pastor under whose ministry I spent most of my youth had a sign in his office which made a deep impression on me. I had made it public that I wanted to be a pastor. I looked to him as a model. And he had a plaque on his office wall which simply read, "Be willing to be inconvenienced." Such is ministry's motto: “I agonize, you thrive.” If we asked Paul to get specific about this agony he would add a third word, the agony of:

3. Intervention

In other words, Paul had to get in the middle of conflicts. We see this clearly in Colossians 2 as he takes on the false teachers who had infiltrated the church. Epaphras comes and tells Paul about heresy. The apostle does not simply look the other way. He walks right into the agony of solving problems head on. Jesus is the chief example of this. He does not back down from Satan in the wilderness. He does not shrink from the
challenge of the religious leaders who would enslave people in their legal self-righteous systems. He rebukes his own disciples when they fail to honor and trust him. So we expect that ministry will involve the agony of intervening in conflict. As we learned at last fall's Peacemaker conference, conflict is an opportunity to glorify God, to do good for others, and to grow personally if we respond in a godly way. Paul also faced the agony of

4. Interference

We don't have time today to detail the many ways Paul suffered persecution. He's writing Colossians from prison. Jesus agonized under the worst kind of persecution as he suffered for us. And Peter reminds us, 1 Peter 2:21, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” When we accept the challenge of serving others for the sake of Christ there will be opposition. We will be misunderstood, falsely accused, and maligned. Such experiences will grow more common in our world. A final word to describe Paul's experience is the agony of:

5. Individual Faithfulness

By this I mean that Paul was aware that he had to maintain a strong personal example lest those whom he served would use his failure as an excuse to give up. He refers to different kinds of athletic training when he writes to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things... 26 So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. 27 But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” Paul understands that he cannot write to the Colossians as he will in chapter 3 to put sin to death in their lives if he is not willing to engage in and endure that process in his own. Jesus endured the agony of his ministry knowing that He was the author and perfecter of our faith. So our service to others involves our willingness to do and be whatever we call them to do and be. Leadership by example.

Paul's Tender Tactic

"I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you," Paul tells the churches. He's not looking for pity, he's longing to see their hearts change. It's a tender tactic. He commands their attention by demonstrating the deep personal concern he feels for them and the difficulties he's willing to endure to see them change. He's not being manipulative. He's not playing one-ups-manship. I did this for you now you do this for me. He's not bargaining. If I do this will you do what I say? No, he's simply expressing his love in a most powerful way. We all have people that we love dearly whom we long to see living for the Lord.

The time may come when we have to approach them like Paul and say, essentially, "I love you and I know that I cannot change you. But before you take another step away from the Lord, I want you to know the agony that I'm experiencing for the sake of your joy in Christ." And if we say it, we have to live it. Our prayers, our sacrifices, our peacemaking, our patience under persecution, and our personal example of godliness must reflect that we are dead serious about God's best for them. We must embody the principle: "I agonize, you thrive." In ministry, agony is essential. But it is not random. It is not meaningless. Paul suffers as he does because he sees a purpose in it. So we must not just leave agony by itself. We must add that:

In Ministry, Agony is Effective

In v. 2 Paul says, I agonize so that their hearts may be encouraged. "Their" refers to all three churches
including the Colossians. Paul's purpose is "encouraged" hearts. He's not simply saying that he wants them to feel better. The Old King James has the word "comforted" here but that's too narrow a definition. The logic is not Paul saying, I'm feeling bad but that's ok so long as you feel good. No Paul sets out his example so that others become stronger, more courageous, more resilient in the face of their own difficulties. Effective Endurance means:

**People Grow More Courageous**

Paul sees the dangers from false teaching, from unrestrained passions, from ethnic segregation and other evils and he calls for courageous hearts. This is not a time for cowards. Take heart. I'm right in there with you.

Another purpose in sharing the agony of ministry is that

**People Grow More Confident**

They gain assurance. That's where we are going next week to look at what assurance is, how we get it, and how we keep it. But we can already see that assurance is not about comfort and convenience. It's something deeper and more profound than that. It's a confidence that remains strong even when life and ministry becomes agonizing. For it will. Only the confidence that Christ by his victory on the cross redeems all suffering for his glory and the perfecting of his people allows us to keep serving others in his Name.