

The Open Secret

a message based on
Colossians 1:24-2:7

Before we read, a few words to remind us about this letter we call "Colossians." Although we're told that it is from Paul and Timothy, Paul seems to be the main author of it. He wrote this letter while he was in prison. How do we know? He tells us in what we call the last chapter.

And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains (4:3).

My fellow prisoner Aristarchus sends you his greetings (4:10).

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. Remember my chains (4:18).

Paul heard about this church which was situated in the Lychus Valley (the Lychus is a river). He heard about it from the man who had planted it, Epaphras, who came to visit Paul in prison. Colosse was one of three major cities in the valley. They are all named, again, in what we call chapter 4, along with the man who planted the churches there.

Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hierapolis... After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea (4:12-13, 16).

In our reading this morning, Paul talks about the task God gave him as an apostle of Jesus Christ. The word he uses to describe this task he calls "*the mystery*" which is his way of writing about "*the word of God in all its fullness.*" Why does he call it a mystery? Other translations try to get at the meaning of that word. It is an "open secret" (according to a man named Moffatt), a "hidden truth" or "a secret plan of salvation" according to Murray J. Harris. In short, the mystery is something that only God can make known to us. It is "unknowable by humankind" apart from God revealing it (M.J.H.).

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Followers of Jesus:

We have a word for it:

oxymoron

It's from the Greek language, two words. "Oxys" means "sharp" and "moros" means "stupid," and together they mean "pointedly foolish." When we say something is an oxymoron, we are sure that the words don't fit together, that they clash against each other (etymonline.com). So we might say of the words in the first verse we just read, the word "*rejoice*" clashes with the words "*suffered*" and "*affliction*." How can someone who suffers also, at the very same moment, rejoice? That doesn't make sense!

In another place Paul writes about his credentials, giving his reasons why his readers can trust what he has to write to them. It's almost like Paul is writing, "I am a name you can trust because of what I've gone through." Listen to what recommends him.

Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything (2 Cor 6:4-10).

"This is why you can trust me," Paul seems to be saying here. "Because I suffer on your behalf."

Elisabeth Elliot writes, "Suffering is the key to existence. Suffering opens our eyes to the centrality of the cross in the Christian life, enables us to lift up the crucified Savior to the rest of the world." She tells of a woman who lived in "a pool of hurt," whose past included broken marriages, whose present included a handicapped child, and who was "tormented by unrelenting pain which interrupts her sleep." This woman wrote Elisabeth a letter: "I totally agree with your statement about accepting suffering as a gift and about offering it up to the Lord. At times of intense emotional or physical pain I have actually envisioned a chalice full of suffering, lifted to the Lord as the only

offering I could bring" ("A Breaking-up and a Breaking-down").

Do we know what she is talking about? Can we relate to Paul who was suffering in prison, yet also rejoicing? This suffering, of course, is not in the same category of the suffering of our Lord Jesus. Last week we were reminded that Jesus suffered on the cross so we could be reconciled to God. Our suffering is not the same as that of Jesus. We heard earlier how we can rejoice in our suffering because in the end, it'll grow us up. It'll get us closer and closer to being like Jesus. Kenneth Leech tells how the Bible urges us to be a follower of Jesus by being an imitator of Christ. "Paul speaks of becoming like Christ in his death (Phil. 3.10)... The idea is far greater than that of imitation, the copying of a model." Instead, what we're to aim at as followers of Jesus is "a conformity to Christ, involving change, and rooted in the fact of his indwelling" ("God, Christ, and the Church").

Paul tells us that he is suffering on behalf of the church. He is suffering, and it is his desire to get the message out to anyone who will hear. What is the message? It is called the word of God in all its fullness, a mystery which is Christ in you. Let's take some time to think of this message by looking together at verse 28.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ (Col 1:28).

Paul, the sufferer, has been given a task. He was not given it by another human being. He was given it by God. He has words to describe this task. Here, in verse 27, he calls it "*the glorious riches of this mystery.*" In another place, he calls it, "*the unsearchable riches of Christ*" (Eph 3:8). Do we notice how he uses the notion of wealth to describe this? We live in a society that thinks of riches in only one way: what we can put our hands on, what we can see with our eyes. Forbes.com last year tells how Warren Buffett is now "the richest man on the planet." He is an investor, and last year his estimated fortune rose to \$62 billion, surging him past the previous richest man, Bill Gates, who is "now worth \$58 billion."

The follower of Jesus, however, has the capability of making others rich without spending one loony or two toonies. So, how do we get rich? I'm not sure how exactly God does it. We hear the message of the gospel: Jesus Christ crucified, raised and ascended. Somehow – and this truly is a mystery! -- somehow through the message proclaimed Christ ends up living inside of us. Jesus says it this way.

"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6).

Have you ever wondered what a good definition of a believer is? What does it mean,

really, to believe in Jesus? Paul tells us right here. A true believer is...

Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:27).

How does Christ get in you? There's only one way.

... Christ may dwell in your heart through faith (Eph 3:17).

In other words, the risen life of Jesus Christ is living inside of the believer.

The question, though, is not, "How does God do this?" The question is, "Has this happened to you? Is Christ living in you? Is he changing you to become like him?" Or, an even better question than that! "Does what God has done for you in Christ Jesus move you to grateful adoration? Do the riches of God's grace lavished on you, break you forth in praise to this wonderful God?" (Such is the insight of F.F. Bruce).

So Christ is dwelling in our hearts when we put our faith in him. Now what? I have been a member of the body of Christ, the church, for many years. I think I did what we call "profession of faith" in the late 1970s. I made the "good confession" in a public ceremony. I said, "I know that God loves me, and has shown this to me in my baptism. Now I want to respond to what God has done and say, 'I love him. I pledge my life to him. I love him, because he first loved me.'" Many of us have done the same. We went to Sunday school. We studied the Bible, and then we studied our catechism. One thing was lacking, though. I believe that the church we call the "Christian Reformed Church" gave the sore impression that once you've publicly professed your faith, you're done. You're complete. You have arrived and need learn no more.

Do you hear what I'm saying? The phrase Paul uses here is "*with all wisdom.*" It refers especially to the teaching we need as followers of Jesus. We need to constantly be taught. It is, as F.F. Bruce claims, "the task of a lifetime to explore". And it's not just for some members of the body, the church. It's not for the "super Christians," while the rest of us hang back and fall way behind. It's for all of us! No part of teaching is reserved for the elite. All wisdom is brought to the reach of all. Nothing is beyond the reach of anyone. This is why the word "*everyone*" is repeated in this verse. Do we know why? It's because of the power of the grace of God! God's grace will reach "the hidden depths of many a heart" (the words of Frances R. Havergal).

Paul is letting his readers know how much he is struggling for them. He uses that word, "*struggling*" twice in this reading. It's the Greek word, "agona" from which we get the word "agony." Epaphras too is struggling for this church. He is said to be

"*wrestling in prayer*" for them. Why such a struggle? The word originally referred to the athletic field where a contest was being waged between athletes. Paul knows by experience that what he is speaking of here is a spiritual conflict that is fought for through prayer.

It's the sort of prayer Augustine speaks of that brought him to faith. When Augustine was young, he wandered far from God. He went away to that "far country," as far away from God as he could. It was his own mother who saw the truth of her young son's life. He thought he was really living. She saw his life, "and discerned the death wherein [he] lay." So she prayed for him. Her name was Monica, and she in her prayers wept for him, and God did not despise her tears, "when streaming down, they watered the ground under her eyes in every place where she prayed" (Confessions).

In other words, she suffered for her son. It is in suffering, you see, that we find hope for the world and for the church. Even Aeschylus, who was certainly no believer, understood this when he wrote: "He who learns must suffer. Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."