

3/24/19 - Col. 1:24-2:5 - "Mystery of Christ Revealed"

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[0 : 00] treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments, for 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. Let's pray. Father, as we open your word this morning, may you apply it to our hearts and make it come alive as Hebrews chapter 4 tells us that the word is living and active, that it was not just alive when we heard it and were saved, but it is active right now to mold us and shape us into the image of Christ. And so we are grateful that you are present in this word, that you make it alive, that you take it and you apply it to our hearts for exactly what we need. Father, I pray for this church as well, that you would continue to raise leaders and you would continue to send forth the word. This church would be a light in our community, that they would continue to reach out and serve those that come through the door. God, we love and praise you in Jesus' name. Amen. So the first thing we look at here is Paul's suffering in ministry. Now, if you were to look through the book of Colossians, in chapter 1, the most debated verse in all of the book of Colossians is actually found right here, where Paul says,

I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's affliction. So what in the world does this verse mean? Now, it certainly doesn't mean that Christ did not suffer enough. Paul is not implying that he is making up the deficit of what Christ did not suffer enough for. But what Paul is talking about here is this little known doctrine. It's called messianic woes. In every segment of the early Judaism and the early church of Paul's day, it was believed that before the Messiah would return, there would be a serious season of what's called birth pains, that there would be serious affliction that would fall upon God's people, that this idea builds from the Judaism teaching that there was a specific amount of suffering that needed to take place before the Messiah would return, and that when the full amount of this suffering is reached, that is when the Messiah will return. That's when the culmination of history will happen. These afflictions will help bring about the end, the eschaton.

They have been labeled as the messianic woes. Mark calls them birth pains, which I think is a very good way of describing the agony and the things that believers go through during this time of this messianic woes, is what Paul references here. Paul's reference then to these afflictions of Christ is not limited to Jesus alone, but it also includes all of us that suffer and all of us that endure in this messianic community. In Philippians chapter 3, he calls it the fellowship of his sufferings, that we take part as one another, as a body of Christ, we take part in this suffering. So as we say there, this probably could be better translated as messianic woes or messianic afflictions. There's also, if you're familiar with the book of Revelation in chapter 6, verse 11, God promises his martyred saints that he will vindicate their blood, but asks them to wait until the full number of their brothers and sisters are killed.

So God has identified a specific amount of time for these things to happen, and then once that happens is when the Messiah, when Christ returns. When Paul says his sufferings are filling up what is lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, all of this is what he has in mind. It isn't that somehow Christ has not suffered enough, because we know as he was taking his last breaths on the cross, his last statement he says is what? It is finished. Hey, tell us, stop. There was no work that was left to be done. So Paul certainly can't mean that he is taking over where Christ just gave him an example and said, here, I'm going to give you half of the work and now you can finish it. Paul's point is that he actually undergoes all of these hardships specifically for, look at verse 24 again, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church. Paul's very intentional about expressing what he does for the sake of the church, because after verse 9 he says, I'm praying for you, and then earlier in verse 24 he says, I'm suffering for you. What he's

probably doing is he's citing the church as a whole with this message, as the reason for his ministry of suffering is for all of the believers, not just necessarily those of the Colossians. Paul surrenders his life, he surrenders all of his comforts for the sake of the gospel, so that the church may be built up and grow. Now follow for a moment here, because that sounds a bit odd. Now Paul is saying, Paul is Paul, okay, and so for his message to be, I'm suffering but it's a good thing, the only way that you can do that, the only way that you can mimic Paul's words of saying, I rejoice in my sufferings, is if you have a right understanding of what suffering produces. It's not enough to just merely comprehend it, but you almost have to expect this suffering to come about. Or maybe a better way to describe it is why you are going through suffering. Here's Paul, again, he's in prison, and he is in the darkest of cells, and he is in a dirty hole in the ground basically, because the prisons of Paul's day were not like we would think of a prison today. Oftentimes they would be holes that were dug in the ground, and all of the waste from the water and the trash and everything would flow down into this cell. And that was where Paul was, and yet he begins with, I rejoice in my sufferings. Why does he do that? How can he do that? He recognizes the importance of suffering on behalf of Christ. He knows that his suffering is not in vain, because he knows that his suffering is actually helping the church to grow. Because think about the message that was being proclaimed during the days of the apostles, and everyone around them was saying that this message was false, and yet there were these guys that were willing to die for the message. And so there had to have been those people around there that thought they must be up to something. If they are willing to go through what they are going through in order to proclaim the good news of Christ, it has to be true.

So Paul recognizes the importance of suffering as a Christian. Go and tell people that message. See what they say about that, right? Hey, I'm suffering as a Christian. I'm suffering for Christ, but I rejoice in it, because that means Christ is actually at work in my life. These hardships and these, the toil that I go through is actually good, because Christ is being honored in my body.

[6 : 51] People will look at you as if you are crazy, because it's the opposite of what we think, or what is actually taught to what it means to be a Christian. The message of suffering as a Christian today is almost completely avoided, because we want to teach something different. If we talk about suffering over and over and over again, you probably don't leave here very encouraged.

You want to hear, you know, God's going to do this, and he's going to take you from here to there, and this great message of encouragement. It's actually taught that if you are suffering, then something is wrong with your faith, or something is wrong with you as a Christian.

If only you had enough of this, you wouldn't be going through this. The message of the church in the New Testament is simply this. You will suffer as a follower of Christ. It is going to happen. It might even be happening to you right now. It might happen as you leave the church today. You might begin to suffer. But listen, if you understand that, if you have a right understanding of what it means to suffer as a follower of Christ, you could be prepared when it happens. You are able to endure it more often. You could take comfort in the fact that Christ is working in your life right now, because if you're prepared for the suffering, you can respond to it when it happens. If you've ever been in a fight before, and you know the person is going to defend themselves, what do you do? You also are in a posture of defense. You are prepared to take whatever that person is going to throw at you. And so it doesn't shock you as much because you anticipate it.

It's the same message as what it means to be a follower of Christ. That there are going to be times and seasons where you will suffer for the sake of Christ. And that suffering will look differently to each one of us. It might be that you step out in faith, and you are bold with the proclamation of the gospel to an unsaved family member. It might be that God is leading you to disciple somebody who you may not think is somebody that you're called to disciple. And it might be a tough season for you.

But we have encouragement in that. Then look at verse 25 through 29. So Paul's mission in ministry here is that he became a minister. This word is very interesting.

[9 : 10] In Greek, the word is diakonos. And it simply means a servant or a table waiter or somebody who would bring the food to the meal. But then they would also go and they would clean up the mess afterwards.

So they would provide the food, but then they would take care of all the issues that happened afterwards. How does that sound like a pastor, right? That the pastor is the one who proclaims the good news, but then he's also there to take care of the issues that happen.

Paul looks at himself simply as just a common man. There is nothing special about him. He is doing a common service. Now proclaiming the word of God is not common. To be a pastor is not something that everyone is called to do. So it's not common in that sense. But what Paul is saying here is that don't look upon me as I'm something special. The definition of minister here, what Paul describes is something that is taken completely over by humility. The whole definition of being a servant of Christ, of being a minister of Christ, is that you are the lowly one. That we as followers of Christ, we submit to Christ's lordship and we are low and we are humble and we are despised. Oftentimes we are forgotten about. We are not looked upon as these amazing people. Sometimes it's the exact opposite.

We don't act independently. We submit to the lordship of Christ. We have no fanfare. We oftentimes are just lost in the crowd. But also notice this. Paul says that he became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you. Paul is saying that something happened to me outside of my control here. Paul had no choice. Turn to Acts chapter 26. Acts chapter 26 is the other conversion story of Paul. We're often familiar with Acts chapter 9. That's the one that is read most commonly. But look at Acts chapter 26 verse 12 through 18.

I want you to notice something here. Verse 12, he says, In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests.

[11:18] At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven brighter than the sun that shone around me in those who journeyed with me. And when he had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads. And I said, who are you, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.

But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me, and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

The servant and witness phrase could also be translated as minister. So picture this for a moment again. We're familiar with the story of Paul, but now read it through the lens of that servant and witness is actually a minister. So Paul is going on his way to kill Christians, okay? He has papers to do whatever he wants to do to the Christians that he comes in contact with. He can arrest them. He can kill them. He can drag them into the streets, do whatever he wants to. He's on his way to do that. And what happens? In one blinding moment, Christ kicks him off of his horse. And you can almost picture that scene that he kind of stoops down and he looks at Paul and he says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And it's interesting because what happens?

Paul says, who are you, Lord? He recognizes that there's something going on here. But in that very moment, he became a minister. That was his calling. He was called out of darkness at that very moment.

And was appointed to the ministry as he was going to kill Christians. What was the source of that? Did he pull out his diploma and he showed his MDiv to Christ? And he said, I have the papers. I'm good, right? I've done the training and I've done the studying. No, it was God. It was the sovereign Lord of Lords. It was the King of Kings. Paul has no right to this task. Anyone who proclaims the good news of Christ, we really have no right to the task. The charge on the life of someone who is a minister has been given to that person by God himself. Any minister, any servant of Christ has been given that task by God himself. Those of us that are lucky enough to preach the word on Sunday mornings or whenever this task has been given by God himself. There is literally nothing else. If you are called to be a preacher, there is nothing else that you can do in this world that will satisfy you unless it is the preaching and teaching of God's word. That's why people become ministers. Not because of any other reason, but it's simply that. It's because we can't not do it. There's something inside of us that causes us to do this week in and week out. I think about my own journey to Christ and how I became a minister. It was 2013 and I had spent years and years in darkness. And those of you that know me personally know the story. I'll save you all the details. But that was when God became real to me for the first time. And I was saved. And I remember shortly after that, I started to get the urge to preach and teach. And honestly, I remember thinking, because I knew no different at this time in my life. I honestly thought this must be what happens to everybody who becomes a Christian. They become saved and then the desire is in them to go and preach and teach. I shortly

found out that that's not the case. And that people began to tell me that there might be a specific calling on my life to go and preach and teach. And many began to say, maybe God is calling you into the ministry. I remember after the first time I got the opportunity to teach. I remember that night praying, like, just simply,

[15:16] Lord, here I am. I'll do whatever you want me to do. I'll go and teach wherever you want me to go. And at that moment, I became a minister. Now, of course, we work out the details and you're called by a church and the church ordains you and all of that. But at that very moment, that's when I knew that that's what the calling on my life was. God just simply plucked me out of where I was. He set the course for my life and he made me a minister. Paul was made a minister also. And look at the statement.

He says, according to the stewardship from God. Now, that clarifies that it came from God, that it was a gift given to him by God. The stewardship, this is a great word. It's oikonomian. This comes from two separate words, which basically means servant and house or manager and house. It literally would mean a servant who manages a house, not for himself, but for the one who owns the house. It was a stewardship. It was a trust, if you will. The task of the manager of the house was to hold all of the resources of the house under direction of the owner and distribute all the treasures of the house to the people for the good of the people. So when Paul became a minister, he was given a deposit by God. When he's writing to Timothy, he says, what guard the good deposit that has been entrusted to you. He had this responsibility to take this deposit that was given to him by God and give it away to the people for the benefit of the people around him. Because look at the end of verse 25, it says for your benefit. So the calling of a minister is not for the minister himself. It's not about exalting the person who is called. It's all for you. It is all for the body of Christ. It is a gift from God. We are to guard the gift. But most importantly, we are to distribute it to those who receive the gift. Paul explains his reason or maybe why the motivation he has to be a minister. And he says to make the word of God fully known.

That's one of my favorite phrases in the entire Bible. It just really excites me. Let me explain why. My task as I stand up here this morning is to do simply that, is to make the word of God fully known. When I teach in any setting, whatever I am, if I'm teaching online or if I'm at another church or if I'm in a discipleship setting, my task is the same. It is to make the word of God fully known.

[17:42] It is not to be funny. It is not to be charismatic. My task, the task of all ministers, is simply to proclaim the full counsel of God, to make the word of God fully known. Paul is a steward of this treasure of the word of God, and he understands how important that is.

And you know something else? This should excite you also, because follow my train of thought here for a moment. Paul says he became a minister to make the word of God fully known. But if you remember 1 Corinthians 11 verse 1, Paul says, be imitators of me as I imitate Christ.

So you also are participating in this ministry as well, that your task is to make the word of God fully known. Now somebody might have just thought, does that mean I have to become a pastor?

Not at all, but for some that might actually be your calling. But what it does mean though, is in the context of where you are on a daily basis, whether that be work or school or home, with your family, wherever it is, you are to make the word of God fully known. You say, I'm not good at it.

I'm worried I'll mess it up. It's a good place to be. Look at Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 9 through 12 real quick. This will give you some comfort. Jeremiah chapter 1 verse 9 through 12.

[19:08] Jeremiah writes, Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

And the word of the Lord came to me, excuse me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. Verse 12. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.

God, as you open your mouth and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ is on your side. God, that sometimes we make proclaiming the word of God difficult. It causes anxiety, right? We are so consumed with what people are going to think about us if we step out and we talk about Christ. But God is literally on your side. When you make the word of God fully known, God is helping you. God is working with you. You're not working against him. He wants you to do that. And as he tells Jeremiah, I am watching over my word.

I will accomplish what I set out to accomplish with it. Take comfort in that. That's encouraging. Paul knew this as well. Paul knew that God was watching over his word, so it freed him up to be bold. He didn't have to care. It also freed him up to make statements like he talked about in the beginning. I rejoice in my sufferings because if God is working with him and using his word to accomplish what God wants to accomplish, he can say, I rejoice in this situation. Because obviously, God is working this out for good. Paul was suffering because he was proclaiming the word of God, but he also knew that God was accomplishing his purpose through the word. Now, perhaps the word that jumps off the page is the most to you as you read this section is this term mystery. And in verse 26 and in verse 27, we see the mystery hidden for ages. And then again, we see the riches of the glory of this mystery.

[21 : 12] This is not a unique phrase to the book of Colossians. I'm sure we've come across this before in our reading. But it's generally recognized by most scholars that Paul borrows this word from the Old Testament and from Judaism. If you're familiar with the word in Daniel 2, where it refers to King Nebuchadnezzar's dream, it says that it's a mystery that God reveals to Daniel. It's the same type of word there. Paul uses this word to denote truth about God and his plan of salvation that had remained hidden in the past, but now had been revealed. So specifically here, what's going on is the mystery is the inclusion of the Gentiles, that this dividing wall of hostility that Christ had broke down in his flesh, has allowed Jew and Gentile to be one family. The Jews and then us, basically, is what's happening here. The mystery was hidden for ages and generations, but now revealed to his saints.

This term here is fantastic. It comes from the word apocalypsis, which literally means to make known a truth that was not able to be known before. God has hidden this truth and he has now revealed it.

This is a newly revealed truth. Look at what Paul says. Paul gives a clear statement in reference to what the mystery is, though. He just simply says, Christ in you, the hope of glory. Now that's a beautiful phrase. We could spend a lot of time with that because there is a lot inside of that verse, this idea of unionship between the believer and between Christ. Like Paul says, I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me. Christ in you, the hope of glory. Paul speaks of the mystery in various ways. He talks about our redemption and our hope, our future inheritance, the unity between Jew and Gentile. But all of this is summed up here in this beautiful image. The mystery is essentially Christ in you, the hope of glory. So then we arrive at Paul's goal in ministry. He says, Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. The goal of every person who proclaims the name of Christ should be this phrase here, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. Not to exalt self, not to make much of yourself, not to have the spotlight on yourself, but we teach and we warn with all wisdom so that as many people as possible might be presented mature in Christ. And remember again, as you teach, God is working with you. God watches over his word to accomplish what he wants through it.

But also notice what Paul says in verse 29. He says, for this I toil, struggling with all his energy. So then you might think, well, if God's watching over his word, then that means I could just stand up and I just let it fly and God's going to do whatever it wants and doesn't matter on my case, right? It's not at all what happens. Because look at what Paul says. Teaching is not easy. This I toil. Paul describes his labor as strenuously contending. It's an athletic image. It speaks about runners straining with every muscle toward the finish line. Paul speaks about this need for a lot of strength. [24 : 45] We all need a lot of strength. We receive it via all his energy that he powerfully works within us. When Paul is in agony, as he struggles in ministry, when he is locked in a cell, Christ graciously fills him with a divine power that far surpasses what anything else could offer.

The last section is Paul's struggle in ministry. Chapter 2, verse 1 through 5. Paul wants the church to know that he has a deep concern for the Colossians and how hard he is striving to meet their needs.

He says, I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you, for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face. His pastoral care is evident in this statement here. He has never been to Colossae, nor has he met many of the believers from his community, but his love for them is evident. His struggle was all the greater due to his imprisonment and his inability to be there, to deal with the church's situation directly.

But he has hope for them, because look what he says. He says that their hearts, yeah, I wrote it wrong on my paper, 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, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

There's four purposes here that Paul has for the believers regarding this letter. He wants to simply to encourage them. So after he tells them he's rejoicing in his sufferings, the present situation is not good. He wants to make the word of God fully known. Now he wants to encourage them. He says, I want to exhort you and I want to comfort you. I want to strengthen you. I want to admonish you.

[26 : 29] That's what he means by that their hearts may be encouraged. Second, he wants, he recognizes that when believers have been taught and encouraged in Christian truth, the result of that is that they will also be knit together in love, that there will be a bond that cannot be broken.

Second, this portrays a congregation that is drawn into deep fellowship with one another. Third, this purpose of knitting together is to enable believers to obtain all the riches of full assurance of understanding. This entire section stresses the riches of biblical comprehension, which is a perspective that is desperately needed in the church today. Paul calls this the full assurance of understanding, meaning the complete assurance and certain knowledge of God's truth that only true understanding can produce. Once we truly comprehend, one of my phrases is right theology produces right living.

You can't do it backwards. You can't live right if your theology is off. Your theology dictates how you live. And that's what Paul's message is to this church. Once you truly comprehend what God has said in his word, that insight into his word provides a straight path to our feet. What it does is it leads to deep conviction. It leads to a clear vision for what the church is supposed to do and for our individual lives.

When this critical discernment takes hold, and in the context of what's going on at Colossae, no false teaching will be able to make its way into the church. Lastly, the biblical insight, theological understanding will lead us to the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ. There's that term mystery again. Now, it's already been explained, but sort of the apex or the thrust of all that Paul is talking about here, the real truth, the foundation of what this mystery is, God's mystery is just simply Christ himself. All these other mysteries that we could talk about, his atoning sacrifice, the inclusion of Gentiles, the fact that you are redeemed and that Christ literally dwells in you, all of those things, they flow out of this one thing, which is just simply Christ himself.

And so Paul's warning as he closes this section, he says, I say this, the reason why I am talking about all of this is in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. For 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. So Paul says at the beginning of verse one, he says, I want you to know. And here he says, I say this, implying that the warning to follow is part of what Paul's big plan is. He really wants them to realize what is happening in this section.

[29 : 27] The danger of these people is that there was these certain kind of teachers that seem to have authority, but that they might delude with the message that was being proclaimed by the church at this time. They might delude it with plausible arguments, persuasive arguments. They sounded convincing, but simply were sidetracking people into serious air. This type of teaching is the polar opposite of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in Christ. But Paul has a dilemma here.

He says, I am absent in body while he is in prison and facing trial in Rome. He has worked so hard to demonstrate through this letter that he loves them and he cares for them. Very simply, he cannot be there with them. He would love to directly confront those that were leading people astray in the church, but he can't. So he reminds the Colossians that he is there with them in spirit. And much to the church's, or much to Paul's delight, the church seems to be standing firm. He says, rejoicing to see your good order in the firmness of your faith in Christ. How are they able to do that? Because here we've talked about, real quick as we close, we've talked about the ability to rejoice in suffering. We've talked about why that is going to happen. We've talked about Paul's mission and how it actually applies to us as well. We talked about Paul's goal, the reason why he is doing these things. And then here we see Paul's struggle. But you read through those things and the one thing that jumps out again, Christ himself. That is how this church, this church here, any church around, that is how the church can do those things. Their faith is a rock solid Christ-centered stance.

The Colossians have started well. They are continuing well. Paul is admonishing them to finish well.

[31 : 30] The letter is an encouragement to us as well that we might continue well, that we might run the race with all endurance, that we might toil and we might strive, that we might give our lives over to the pursuit of Christ through the preaching and teaching of his word. Let me close with this.

One of the commentaries that I read, I saw a quote, one guy put it like this, this epistle, this letter to the Colossians, is a vaccination against heresy, not an antibiotic for those already afflicted. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the chance to open your word this morning. We're so grateful that you are using it to accomplish your purposes, that you are using us as clay vessels to speak through us and to encourage one another, that we know that you are, we are ambassadors for Christ, that you are literally making your appeal through us. It gives us comfort and confidence as we go about our day today, that you would place someone in our lives that needs to hear the good news of Christ, and you would allow us to be a part of that journey. God, we love and praise you in Jesus' name. Amen.