

THE MINISTRY OF THE MYSTERY

CPC, 7/6/08

Col. 1:27-29

INTRO

We all love a good mystery story about a buried treasure chest. . . I've even had dreams of finding one and opening it and feel the coins trickle through my hands.

Our text today is about another mystery, another treasure chest. It was a mystery, as we saw in v. 26, that was kept hidden "from" ages and "from" generations, kept under wraps for hundreds and hundreds of years. And now, v. 26, now in Paul's age and generation, God has chosen, v. 27, to reveal the mystery, to His saints. You can almost catch the thrill of excitement in Paul's voice as he prepares to pull back the curtain, open the treasure chest and reveal this spectacular mystery.

V. 27 tells us that it was a mystery full of the riches of glory. This was no ordinary mystery, it was the mother lode. Paul piles on words here to paint a picture of something lavish, magnificent, splendiferous, as if to look into this astonishing mystery would be like exploring a palace richly stocked with treasures, each one revealing more fully than the last the majesty of the owner (N.T. Wright). How great, how vast, the text says, are the riches of the glory of this mystery.

So what is it?! Would you like to know? You already do. It was read for us in v. 27. Three simple words, the most astounding thing in the universe: **Christ in you**. If you yawned when you heard those words, then you haven't been paying attention the last few weeks! Vv. 15-20, in me?! The image of God, the head of creation, the Creator, the head of the church, the reconciler of all things, the one in whom all the fullness of God dwells—in me??!

What could be a greater mystery? And yet this is the Gospel, that as many as received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, children born not of the will of man, but born of God. Children in whom the seed of God lives, according to 1 Jn. 3:9, the very DNA of God Himself. And how? Through the promised Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, who comes to take up residence in those whose hearts have been cleansed by repentance and faith in the blood of the cross of Christ. Gal. 2:20. Jn. 14:20, 23, "On that day you will realize that I am in the Father and you are in Me and I am in you." "If anyone loves me he will obey my teaching. My father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." Rev. 3:20. 2 Cor. 13:5, "Do you not realize that Christ is in you?!"

So didn't the Jews of past ages know of this astonishing plan of God? They had intimations. God had promised to be with them, to put His name among them and to be their God. But for God Himself, the God who dwells in unapproachable light, the God who when He came down on Mt. Sinai, came with a trumpet blast and thunder and smoke and lightning and the whole mountain trembled, so that all the people trembled, the God who sat enthroned between the cherubim in the inaccessible Holy of Holies, to come and take up residence within the hearts of His own people, this was a mystery too profound to be

considered. No, this was the sacred secret, hidden in the past, now made known by the Spirit to His people, Christ in you.

The hope of glory. Looks two ways, backwards and forwards. The glory that God gave the first Adam in the garden, made in the image of God, living in perfect harmony and bliss. The glory that was shattered at that first rebellion, the glory that is only now faintly seen in the affairs of men, obscured by our selfish ways, ravaged by our sinful hearts. Broken relationships, fractured societies, warring nations, poverty, injustice, oppression, pain so deep it's unspeakable and seems incurable. All because we left the path, we fell short of the glory of God by each seeking our own way. And now God promises the hope of that glory to return, now, as we let Christ dwell in us and bring His *shalom* back to our lives.

But there is a look ahead as well. 3:4, "When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory." 2 Thess. 2:14, "To this He called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." The indwelling of the exalted Christ is the assurance of coming glory. This is not a vague possibility or even an expectation; it is an assured hope, it will happen! It is the hope that Paul has already referred to, laid up for us in heaven, v. 5, the hope of the Gospel, v. 23, the hope that "our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." (Rom. 8:19)

But that's not all! There is something even more remarkable in this mystery. Did you notice, "*How great among the Gentiles. . .*"? You see, the Jews understood God's plan of salvation as revolving around them. Rom. 9:4,5, theirs is the adoption as sons, theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the Law, the temple worship and the promises, and from their race is the Christ. In fact, the Gentiles, as Paul describes in Eph. 2:12, were "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." And so here is the greatest depth of the mystery, that those who were far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ, so that they are no longer strangers and aliens but are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. That is why God chose to make known how great *among the Gentiles* are the riches of the glory of this mystery. Christ in you, the Gentile Colossians, that is the great mystery. Here, of all places, the wealth of God is lavished!

TRANSITION

That, then, is the revelation and the riches of the mystery. The book might well end here, caught up in the wonder and glory of Christ in us. And they all lived happily every after. A nice cozy little club, full of the glory of Christ. A holy ghetto. And what would be wrong with that picture? Well, what would be wrong is that this Christ who now indwells us is the great shepherd of the sheep who seeks and saves the lost. And so this Jesus inside Paul drives him to do something beyond revel in the glory of worship. Jesus has made peace through the blood of His cross. But there is something yet lacking: that message of reconciliation must be proclaimed to the world, for faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. So we come to the 2nd part, the ministry.

THE MINISTRY, vv. 28.29

1. Heart. "Him we proclaim" Present, indicative tense: habitual, constant activity. That was it, plain and simple. The false teachers had a system of teaching, a philosophy and traditions of men (2:8), lists of rules and regulations (2:16), but Paul had one thing he knew and yet it wasn't a thing it was a Person. Christ was the center of his affections, the focus of his thinking (3:1,2), the example of his living (2:6), and the subject of his preaching. He resolved to know nothing amongst the Corinthians, but Christ and Him crucified. He proclaimed, announced, made known the person and the work of Jesus. What a great measuring rod for a ministry, a church, a life: is it proclaiming Jesus?! Keep the main One the main thing at CPC.

2. Method. How did Paul do this? In 2 ways, warning and teaching

a. Warning, *noutheteo*. Means admonish, correct, put right, set in proper order. The implication of the word is that something is out of joint and it needs to be put back in place. Used in Eph. 6:4 for bringing up children in the admonition of the Lord, they get out of line, bring them back in. It is necessary in the realms both of what we think and what we do. Paul says in Tit. 3:10 to warn the heretic, the person who stirs up division, in 1 Thess. 5:14, to admonish the idle, in 2 Thess. 3:14, to warn the one who is not obedient. And that was a part of Paul's ministry or proclaiming Christ. If you claim to follow Christ, you must get your life and your doctrine in line with Him, and if you don't you need to be called out.

Paul did this. For instance, he told the Ephesian elders that he had admonished each of them, night and day, for 3 years! (Acts 20:31). Typically a private function, one-on-one. And it's not just a job for the pastors, 3:16 we are to admonish one another. The church in Rome was considered a mature church because they were able to admonish one another (Rom 15:14).

But note what the standard is. Not a list of man-made rules and regulations; rather Christ and His, in the context of proclaiming Him.

b. Teaching, *didasko*, perhaps the more public ministry, the proclamation of the truths of Jesus Christ and instruction in how to follow Him.

c. With all wisdom. It takes wisdom to admonish! And also to teach, to adapt the presentation (not the content) to different audiences with differing needs, as Paul did in Acts. Note the jab at the false teachers, who claimed a special wisdom. Paul saying, we have it too but our wisdom is not esoteric it is simply Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, 2:3.

3. Goal. Maturity in Christ. *Teleion*. Word means to finish or complete, nothing more left to be done (Lk. 13:32, finish my course), nothing undone. So in relationship to our lives, a good translation is maturity, as ESV, when someone is grown up there is no more growing up to do, they are complete, or perfect. And spiritually, this is the goal of ministry, that there be nothing lacking in the people we're working with. Pretty good picture of that in 1:22, also 1:10. Heb. 5:14 says

that solid food is for the mature who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. In Eph. 4: 13,14, mature spiritual adulthood is called the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we are no longer children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, but we grow up into Christ.

But notice we will be perfect “in Him.” As the creation only came into existence in Him, so the final restoration is possible only in Him. It is what Christ does for us and in us, so Paul is going to keep talking about Christ, keep warning and teaching, until they get there. And when will that be?

Present. By whom, to whom, when? Paul had this keen sense that one day God was going to settle accounts with him, ask what he had done with all He had given and commissioned him. 2 Cor. 11:2, “I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to Him.” So he says on that day I want to be able to present you mature, complete, perfectly pleasing to Him.

The true pastor is not satisfied with anything less than the full Christian maturity of every believer, no exceptions. The apostolic task is not completed with the conversion of people. In some cases that’s the easy part. The Gospel must be worked into people until they are mature, and that’s not easy, in fact Paul says in Gal. 4:19, “My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.” When you’re squeezed, Christ comes out. The work will go on by the Spirit until our lives and His are indistinguishable.

4. Scope. “Everyone”, lit. “every man.” 2 things to notice here.

It’s for every**one**. One, no freeloaders, just along for the ride. It’s easy to sit in church and enjoy and cherry pick. But it’s too easy to hide in a big church. Every pew, every row, every person needs to reach a point where they are mature in Christ. Paul said in 1 Thess.2:11, we exhorted and encouraged and implored “each of you.” Notice the shot at the false teachers who said the mysteries of spirituality were only for a select few. This is for everyone!

But it’s also for **everyone**. While it narrows down to each individual, it also broadens to everyone in the whole world. This is not an arcane doctrine kept under the seal of secrecy, but more like computer shareware, free for all to download—who find out about it. Whole book is in a missionary context, Paul in Ephesus, Epaphras becomes a believer, sent to Colossae, church started.

You see, if v. 20 is true and if the only way to get in on that before a final, irrevocable day of reckoning is to hear the message and put your faith in Christ, then it was only logical that the message had to be spread and taken to “every man.” Paul pretty near did it! C.f., v. 23, v. 6. We need to remind ourselves that even as we work hard here at CPC and in Indy, the ministry is much larger in scope. And while 2 billion across the globe in 2,000 people groups have yet to hear of this glorious mystery for the very first time, we need to be doing something about it. Let God expand the scope of your ministry.

5. Power, v. 29. Does that kind of work sound hard? It's impossible! Well, there's a secret. Here it is. If that looks like Greek to you it's probably because it is. But you can read it, you really can! Watch:

εις ο και κοπιω αγωνιζομενος κατα την ενεργειαν αυτου την

kopio **agonizomenos** *energeian*

ενεργουμενην εν εμοι εν δυναμει

energoumenain **dunamai**

kopio: severe work, manual labor, used for work which left one so weary it was as if you had taken a beating. Weariness that comes from being repeatedly struck. 2 Tim. 2:6, hard working farmer, that dawn to dusk back-breaking work that leaves you blissfully numb at the end of the day. Paul loved this word, used it more than a dozen times for his work in the ministry. Like 1 Cor. 15: 10, speaking of the other apostles, "I worked harder than any of them." Partly because he supported himself in the ministry. But also the ministry of the Word, like in Troas, Acts 20, preached until midnight, raised Eutychus, then talked until dawn. Paul rolled up his sleeves and threw himself into the missionary task. He didn't go about his work half-heartedly, vaguely hoping that the grace of God would fill in the gaps where he was too lazy .

agonizomai: struggling, striving. The picture is of agonizing in an athletic event or a fight, with the goal in mind of winning. Intense concentration of every fiber of his being. 1 Cor. 9:25, "everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training, or exercises self-control in all things." The point is it hurts, there's a sacrifice to be made. But it's different than just working hard, because here you have resistance, opposition, an opponent, an enemy, and you have to exert extra hard to overcome them. That's Paul. He says I discipline my body and keep it under control—for the sake of the Gospel!

1 Thess. 2:9, "Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the Gospel of God."

4:12, Epaphras agonizing in prayer on their behalf so they would stand mature.

The mystery of the ministry for some might be what you do with the other 4 work days of the week. Not for the true minister.

Luther worked so hard that many days he fell into bed.

Moody's bedtime prayer once was, "Lord, I'm tired! Amen."

Wesley rode 60-70 miles many days (not in a Toyota), and preached 3X/day

G. Campbell Morgan kept a newspaper clipping, "Sheer Hard Work."

Alexander McLaren got up early when he heard the workmen's boots in the street.

Are you tired yet? How did these men do that? How did Susannah Wesley do it? To her absent husband, Susannah Wesley wrote: I am a woman, but I am also the mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you, yet in your long absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my charge as a talent committed to me under a trust. I am not a man nor a minister, yet as a mother and a mistress I felt I ought to do more than I had yet done. I resolved to begin with my own children; in which I observe, the following method: I take such a proportion of time as I can spare every night to discourse with each child apart. On Monday I talk

with Molly, on Tuesday with Hetty, Wednesday with Nancy, Thursday with Jacky, Friday with Patty, Saturday with Charles

You say, not me, I'm just a layman?! Morgan goes on to say, "What is true of the minister is true of every man who bears the name of Christ. We have not begun to touch the great business of salvation when we have sung, 'Rescue the Perishing, Care for the Dying.' We have not entered into the business of evangelizing the city or the world until we have put our own lives into the business, our own immediate physical endeavor, inspired by spiritual devotion."

So how do we do it? Did you notice the verse isn't finished yet, which is a good thing?! If all Paul did was toil and agonize, it would be a pretty depressing picture. "With the energy of Him"—praise God for the "of Him." What does that energy do? It energizes us, mightily, like dynamite. The verse could read, "impelled by that energy of His" or "greatly empowered" or "the energy that Christ powerfully generates within me." That's the problem, isn't it, we run out of energy, don't we? We're like batteries, there's a fixed amount of energy in us.

Sometimes it doesn't take a whole lot to deplete it, like a little comment from a colleague and we want to quit. What we need is a generator inside us, a nuclear reactor, something that can produce energy. Where could we get that?! Do you remember the Mystery?! Jesus, who created all things, in heaven and on earth (v. 16), lives in us and He has that unlimited supply of energy. So how come we run out of it? Because we live and work in our own strength, in the flesh, and not in the Spirit. George Verwer said, "My spiritual batteries run down all the time and if God doesn't meet me every single morning I might as well hang it up." "But," and then he smiles with a twinkle in his eyes, "God has met me every single morning for the past 27 years!" When Paul claimed to have worked harder than all of the other apostles, he said in the very same verse, "Yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." 1:11

So how do we actually get that strength? Isa. 40:31, "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." Waiting on the Lord. Not like a child who runs in from playing to ask if dinner is ready and then runs back out to play. No, waiting in His presence, enjoying His person, hearing His voice in the Word, pouring your heart out to Him, being with Him.

So who works, us or God? This is one of those beautiful mysteries of our part and God's part seamlessly working together as one, like we find in Phil.2:12,13, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." In fact, there seems to be a correlation between our work and God's supply of energy. It's not that we just sit there like a bump on the log and God activates us like a robot. Nor is it a tag-team wrestling match, where we work and fight as long as we can and then we drop out and let God finish things up. It is an ongoing process of us working and God flooding us with energy and us spending it and He re-supplying it etc. It is a great struggle, to see Christ formed in the hearts of the Colossians and the Laodiceans, per 2:1 as we'll see next week with Joe. But there is a great Christ

providing the dynamic energy needed for Paul to keep on proclaiming Christ, admonishing and teaching until they are mature in Christ.

Oswald Chambers, "If I am devoted to the cause of humanity only, I will soon be exhausted and come to the place where my love will falter; but if I love Jesus Christ personally and passionately, I can serve humanity though men treat me as a door mat. The secret of a disciple's life is devotion to Jesus Christ."

APPLICATION

You have come today with a great many and a great variety of needs. See which of these applications is closest to your need this morning; maybe you have a need of:

1. Possessing Christ. Your life may be all messed up, you've tried to run things yourself and it's not working. You have no hope; there's nothing glorious in your life; you're as far from the Garden of Eden as you could possibly be, and heaven is definitely not in your future. God offers you today the hope of glory! If you will turn from your sins and put your faith in the cross of Christ, He will forgive your sins and then amazingly come to take up residence in your heart, Christ Himself will come in and make everything new! But you must receive Him, give Him our life.
2. Perfecting Christ. Maybe you say you know what if I were honest I'd have to say I have Christ in me but I have got a long way to go myself before I am mature in Christ. There are some key areas where I am not letting Christ live in me, and it's out of line, it's ugly, it needs to be set right, I need to grow up and let Christ be fully formed in me.
3. Proclaiming Christ. Maybe you'd look at your life and you'd say, you know I've received Him, and I'm pretty happy about that—but I'm not releasing Him to others. The effect of my life is that I'm keeping Him to myself. Come to think of it, I could not use the word "labor" and "agonize" to describe my involvement in reaching out to others. In Eph 4, Paul says that the body will not be built up, will not reach maturity, unless every part does its work. I need to look for ways to proclaim Christ, maybe in my family, to friends, colleagues. I need to be prepared to admonish and look for opportunities to teach. Maybe I need to expand the scope of where my life impacts.
4. Power of Christ. Maybe you've been serving your heart out and you're just plumb out of gas, in fact maybe you've even been running on fumes for awhile. You need to pull up to the gas pump. Actually, you don't even need to do that because you've got the oil field inside you—it's Christ. You just need to spend some time with Him, worship Him, draw near to Him—and then let His dynamic energy invigorate you all over again for the work He's set before you.

Phil 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."