

Jesus and the Mystery of God

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- [0 : 0 0] St. John's Shaughnessy Church I'd like you to open your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1. We're going to be looking at verses 24 to chapter 2 verse 3. Colossians is in the New Testament section of your few Bibles.
- I have to tell you, the very first time that I read this passage some years ago, I thought something was terribly wrong with Paul the Apostle.
- He begins this section of his letter by saying, Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake.
- By my experience, and in my experience, normal people do endure suffering. They do not rejoice in their suffering.
- [1 : 3 3] I was brought up to believe that joy is an emotion that is evoked by well-being, by success, by good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.
- Joy is excitement of pleasurable feeling caused by the acquisition or expectation of good. Joy has to do with delight, exaltation, and exhilaration of spirits.
- That's from Webster Dictionary. And of course, implicit in that definition is the idea that joy comes as a result of favorable circumstances.
- But what happens when circumstances are not favorable? What happens when life is surrounded by suffering, especially suffering for the sake of the gospel?
- What normal people do is that they lose their joy and begin to endure the suffering. And that's why Paul's announcement in verse 24 comes as a surprise.
- [2 : 5 3] And it did come to me as a surprise some years ago. It says, Now I rejoice. I'm not just enduring my suffering. I rejoice in my suffering for your sake.
- And of course, from the life of Paul, we know that his sufferings were not just few. Paul suffered many things for the sake of the gospel.
- From the time that he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, his life and ministry were marked, not by well-being or by good fortune, or by wonderful success in ministry.
- His life and ministry were marked by hardship and intense suffering. To the point that Paul himself said that he despaired of life.
- Instead of being perplexed and plunged into sadness, Paul writes to the Colossians, I rejoice in my suffering. And here is a question.
- [3 : 5 9] Why did Paul so rejoice in his suffering for the sake of the church? The first thing that we see in verse 24 is that Paul saw his suffering as a completion of what was lacking in Christ's afflictions.
- Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.
- The way Paul saw his sufferings for the church was that he was filling up. He was completing what was lacking in the afflictions of Jesus Christ for his church.

Here is a verse of scripture that has caused a lot of trouble within Christendom. Some theologians and Christians have used this particular verse as a ground for insisting and ascertaining that Christ's atoning sacrifice is defective.

And therefore, we need the sufferings of the saints, we need the prayers of the saints in order to supplement the work of Christ on our behalf.

[5 : 21] But that's completely contrary to what Paul is trying to say here. Paul is not saying that there is something lacking in the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

Paul is not saying that the sacrifice of Christ is deficient and therefore needs the suffering of Paul in order to complete it. Paul believed and wrote in the New Testament, and we find out in other letters in the New Testament, that the sacrifice of Christ for our sin is complete.

It is once and for all. Christ in his death has brought forgiveness completely. There is no need to supplement the saving work of Christ.

And even if Paul were to want to supplement this, he was completely not qualified to do it. Nobody was qualified, and nobody is qualified, except Jesus Christ himself.

What Paul is saying here is that his sufferings, which he received in the course of his gospel ministry to the church, are not just Pauline sufferings.

[6 : 37] These are not just the sufferings of Paul. They are part and parcel of the affliction that Jesus Christ himself is receiving for his body, the church.

The afflictions of God's people, like Paul himself, are Christ's afflictions. And Christ's afflictions, in this sense, are incomplete until the end of the age.

Jesus Christ continues to suffer in his people when they suffer for the sake of the gospel. And where did Paul get this idea?

You remember that in Acts chapter 9, when Paul was traveling to Damascus to persecute the Christians in Damascus. The Bible says that a light flashed from the heavens, and Paul fell down, and he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?

And Saul answered, Who is it, Lord? He says, I am Jesus, who you are persecuting. See, when Paul was persecuting the Christians in Jerusalem, and when he was going to Damascus to persecute the Christians in Damascus, Jesus said to him, I am the one that you are persecuting.

[8 : 01] Christ is the head, and we are the body. And when the body of Christ is suffering for the sake of the gospel, Christ, the head, is also suffering.

I think it's the prophet Isaiah that said, In the afflictions of my people, I am afflicted myself. In the afflictions of Christ's people, Christ himself is also being afflicted.

The knowledge of this fact, that his suffering was a sharing in the afflictions of Christ, in the sufferings of Christ, brought joy to the life of Paul.

And I think it's something that's very, very instructive for all of us, as we suffer for the gospel. That in our suffering, we are also completing the sufferings of Christ for the sake of the church.

Christ suffers in our suffering. And that is why we rejoice, because we are participating in the sufferings of Christ. Your suffering for the sake of the gospel in your workplace, your suffering for the sake of the gospel during this time of Christmas, is a part of the sufferings of Christ.

[9 : 21] There is a union in this suffering. And for this, Paul rejoiced. Secondly, Paul rejoiced in his suffering, because his suffering was a result of carrying out the most important ministry, the most important work in the world.

In verse 25, Paul says, I became a minister according to the divine office, which was given to me for you. Paul knew very well that God had called him to be the servant of the church for the discharge of our unique stewardship.

God had given him a divine office, and in the execution of this divine office, Paul suffered. And he says, I rejoice in this suffering, because this divine stewardship, this unique stewardship that had been committed to him by God is important enough.

And he suffered for it. And what was this divine office? It says, it is to make the word of God fully known. The unique stewardship that Paul received, for which he suffered, and for which he rejoiced, and not just endured it, was to make the word of God fully known, especially to the Gentiles.

Paul was very clear that he has been entrusted with the commission of making the full word of God fully known. And by so doing, he will contribute to the ultimate fulfillment of God's saving purpose for the Gentiles, as well as the Jews.

[11 : 13] And he was proud of it. And I think I want to stress this, at this point, that Christian ministry is the ministry of the word of God.

Paul, who was sent by Christ to the Gentiles, was commissioned to preach the word of God. And not just to preach the word of God.

So Paul rejoiced in his suffering because he was suffering in the ministry of the word of God. And this word of God is not just preaching the word of God, it is the full preaching of the full word of God to the Gentiles.

And here is something that is important for us. The ministry of the New Testament is the ministry of the full proclamation of the full word of God.

Some years ago, when I was in seminary, it was a common belief that Anglican clergy are called fundamentally to dispense the sacraments.

[12 : 31] And interestingly, this is not the belief of the Anglican Church. It is modern. It is not part of our doctrinal beliefs as a church.

New Testament ministry, whether it is in the Anglican Church or anywhere else, is a ministry of the word of God. And out of that ministry flows the sacraments.

It is only in the context of the proclamation of the full word of God that the sacraments are meaningful and useful. They are important. It is always in the context of God's word.

And whoever has New Testament ministry like Paul is committed to make the word of God not half known but fully known.

And in verse 26 and 27, Paul begins to define this word of God a little bit more specifically. He defines this word in terms of a mystery.

[13 : 33] It says, The mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. What is this word of God?

It is a mystery that was hidden for ages but is now made known to the saints. And Paul borrows this word mystery from the religious vocabulary of his own time.

There were mystery religions, some mystery cults, some mystery practices. I remember when I was growing up some years ago, I stopped growing up when I was growing up.

I got the impression that Christianity was all shrouded in mystery. In those days, we had clergy who were chanting in Latin with their backs to the congregation.

And if you asked any important question, theological question, the answer that you would get is this, My child, that is a mystery.

[14 : 36] mystery. And so I grew up resenting that word and every time I saw mystery in the New Testament, I'd skip it because I wasn't going to understand it anyway, so what was the point?

But mystery in the New Testament is not what is hidden. Mystery in the New Testament is what was hidden but is now made manifest to the people of God.

every mystery in the Bible is revealed in the New Testament. In fact, mystery here is the Christian word for revelation of the Gospel.

The Gospel that was hidden in the past has now been revealed. In other words, it is impossible for us in our human understanding to discover the knowledge of the Gospel.

It has to be revealed. And that's what Paul is saying here. The mystery of the Gospel has now been revealed. And it is a revelation that God gives to all of his saints.

[15 : 46] And of course, Paul is using this word to challenge the exclusiveness of the mystery teaching of some false teachers in Colossae. They were teaching that there is a way of entering into the fullness of God and it is mysterious.

There is a mystery that taught in the way that you can apprehend the fullness of God. But Paul says the mystery of God is not for a religious elite.

It is not for some spiritual aristocrats. God's mystery by contrast is available and it is available to all the saints.

To them, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

See, God chose to reveal this mystery. This mystery which is the word of God is clearly explained as Christ in you, the hope of glory.

[16 : 58] See, that is the secret that was hidden that is now made known to all the saints. That all the riches of the glory of this mystery has been unveiled.

It has been opened up and that mystery is that Christ who is in you is your hope of glory. And I think it is something important for us this morning that the Gentiles who by nature did not have God and who did not have hope Paul says by virtue of the fact that Christ is in you you now have God and you have the hope of glory.

In other words, the indwelling Christ who is in you gives you the certainty and the guarantee that you are going to experience the fullness of God's glory on the final day.

Today, we have a measure of that glory in the justification that we've received in Christ, in the sanctification that we've received, but at the end of the age when the revelation of the sons of God will happen, you and I will experience the fullness of that glory.

Why? Because Christ is in you. And that's a wonderful word of assurance. Paul is giving comfort to the people of God.

[18 : 34] Paul is giving assurance to the people of God. In Christ, you have everything that you need.

And this is why in chapter 2, Paul again defines Christ as the mystery of God. And Christ, who is the mystery of God, contains all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

every wisdom that you and I need, every treasure that you and I need in order to receive salvation, to receive sanctification and power and glorification are found in Jesus Christ.

There is no other place where you can find wisdom and knowledge and understanding. It is in Christ alone. And what am I saying?

Stop looking for knowledge. Stop looking for wisdom. Stop looking for salvation that will lead you to the fullness of glory outside of Christ.

[19 : 41] Because there is none outside of Him. It is the fullness of all that we need. Some years ago, I was in the university that had a number of people who were teaching and preaching with all vehemence that for you to receive the fullness of God's glory, you need to fast 40 days.

You are a Christian, you have a measure of the glory of God, but the fullness of God's glory, the fullness of the hope of glory, will come to you if you fast 40 days and 40 nights.

And if that were the case, I don't know how many of you here would have a hope of glory. When you miss a meal in the morning, you get a headache, 40 days will be a stretch.

And that's what Paul is dealing with here. See, this is, the glory of God is Christ plus something. I used to hear the same sort of messages today. If you are going to experience the fullness of God's glory, there is something spiritually mystical that you have to do.

The rest of the chapter, in chapter 2, Paul talks about the false teachers who have come with the teaching of circumcision. If you are going to experience the fullness of God's glory, you need to be circumcised.

[21 : 15] You need to practice some spiritual mysticism. And you need to do this, you need to do that. But Paul says that the fact that Christ is in you is a guarantee that you are going to enjoy the hope of glory.

It is absolute and it is complete. Christ in you is your hope of sharing eternity with God. Christ in you is your guarantee that you have eternal fellowship with God and there is nothing else that is necessary.

New age religion continues to sell us some things in addition to Christianity offering some hope and we must say no to all of those things.

Christ is sufficient. In him are the treasures of wisdom. In him are the treasures of knowledge. In him are the riches of the glory of God.

In him is your hope of glory. And that's all you need. and the Bible says that these treasures of wisdom and knowledge are stored up in Christ.

[22 : 25] In other words, it can never be taken away. They are hidden. They are stored up in him. There is absolutely nothing that can take them away. And when you have Christ, you have everything that you need.

And that was Paul's ministry. If Paul's ministry was to proclaim this word of God, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory, what was his aim?

His aim is found in verse 28. He says his aim was to present every man, every woman, mature in Christ. In other words, it is not enough to come to repentance and faith in Christ.

Paul wanted us to be mature and wants us to be mature in Jesus Christ. And what does it mean to be mature? What does it mean to present us mature in Christ?

He wants us to have the richness of understanding, the riches of assured understanding, and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ.

[23 : 33] It is one thing to believe in Christ, it is another thing to have an assurance and an understanding of the riches of what you have. God's love.

And Paul says, his aim is to bring us to that maturity, so that we are not tossed back and forth by every wind of doctrine. Somebody comes into town and says, unless you are circumcised, you are not going to enter into the kingdom of God, and you begin to toss and fade.

Somebody says, if you died now and you didn't do this or do that, you are not going to have the hope of glory. And you begin to toss and wave. Paul says, his goal is to bring us to maturity, where we have the assurance that all the riches of the glory of God in this mystery of Christ has been given to us.

And that's his goal. And here is the problem. How is Paul going to achieve his goal? How are we going to achieve the goal of maturity in our own ministries?

And that's where the trap comes in. At this point, false teachers will add their mysticism and works of righteousness and spiritism.

[24 : 50] And of course, the whole idea of the glory cloud that I spoke about earlier, fasting 40 days will all come in. Works righteousness will all come in. But Paul says that the way to bring us to maturity is by proclaiming Jesus Christ.

Verse 28 at the beginning. He says, him we proclaim. We proclaim Christ because he is the center and the circumference of God's mystery.

We proclaim Christ because he is the hope of glory. It is only in him that we mature. And it is by him and through him that maturity comes.

And so he proclaims Christ as Savior, as Lord, as King, as the risen one, as the exalted one, the full proclamation of Christ.

But not only will he proclaim Christ, he will warn every man and teach every man. Here again, Paul helps us to understand that what is needed in bringing us to maturity is not just some positive proclamation of the gospel.

[26 : 05] There is a place in the proclamation of the gospel for warning. Warning you and I of error and rebuking Christians of error in their faith and in their practice.

And it is an important part of the bringing of the people of God into maturity. There has to be warning and rebuke. It is essential for spiritual maturity.

And that's exactly what Paul did in the rest of the book of Colossians. And there is a place for the teaching, the continual teaching of the whole counsel of God in the body of Christ if we are going to reach this maturity.

And so I encourage you this morning not to be tired of the teaching of the word of God because it is only through the warning and the teaching of God's word that will come to full maturity in Jesus Christ.

And finally Paul says towards this I toil for this I toil striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

[27 : 13] It is not an easy job. It is not an easy job to proclaim the gospel. It is not an easy job to warn and teach. There is toiling, there is striving.

But Paul was not toiling and striving in his own power. He did his work through the power that God has given to him. It is as we walk the walk of ministry that God's power is made manifest through us.

I want to conclude by saying one thing to you this morning. Keep your eyes, keep your heart, keep your faith focused on the person of Jesus Christ.

He is your everything, in him is everything you need, president, and he is in you. He is your hope of glory and nothing else.

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[28 : 23] John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org. That address is www.stjohns.org.

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