

Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

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Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians Colossians 1:25-27- The Mystery of the Gospel

25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, 26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, 27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Perhaps I should have tried a bit harder to come up with an opening illustration for our text, but if you would allow me to reminisce back to a time before I knew Christ, a time when I found some enjoyment in the constant watching of reruns of a particular TV series, I think a point will be made.

In a particular episode of the TV series MASH which depicted the sorted lives of the personnel of an Army surgical hospital serving on the front lines during the Korean War in the 1950's there had been a lull in the battle. It was winter and there was not much to do but to keep warm. One of the doctors received a mystery novel, a real "who done it" and of course the entire camp, being bored out of their minds, desperately wanted to read the book. So intense was this desire that as the one doctor would read a chapter, he would then tear it out of the paperback and give it the next person. This went on until all the chapters were circulating in the camp. All the discussion was about who the murderer could be. Everyone was anxiously awaiting the final chapter. The character whose book it had been, decided to read the final chapter aloud so that all would hear together "who done it." As the doctor turned over the page to read the final words that announced the culprit, it was discovered that the last page was missing.

The whole camp was flabbergasted; but then cooler heads seemingly prevailed as person after person offered their opinion of who the murderer was. But with each theory there was something pointed out as wrong. Finally, it was decided to try to call the author of the book back in the States to ask her. The doctor got her on the phone and after some discussion, he was told the outcome. After hanging up the phone, he told the camp and there was an unsettled sigh of relief. The mystery had been solved. But then it was pointed out that the person who the author said had done it couldn't have and the mystery was once again undisclosed and so ended the episode.

Everyone loves a good mystery. But what is it that makes a mystery good? Generally speaking, a mystery is good once it has been discovered; once the answer has been revealed; once it is known what made the mystery a mystery in the first place.

In our text this morning we have finally come back to Colossians 1. We took a detour once we studied verses 24-25 because we as we noted Paul's passion for the church, it was my desire to examine how his passion is also to be our passion; that just as Paul had been made a minister to or for the church, having been given the spiritual gift of preaching the Word of God to people; that we also need to realize that everyone who is a believer also has a gift by which to minister to and for the church.

But let us remember the grand context now of Colossians 1. This chapter is about the gospel; about the good news of the greatness, glory and grace of our God, who by His will and

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through our Lord Jesus Christ's death on the cross for our sins and by His life being made our life by faith, has qualified us (1:12) to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light (that is we look forward to heaven rather than hell); and He has rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom (the reign and rule) of His beloved Son. This is the gospel; the good news; the message of God to man. In the words of Colossians 1:25, this is Word of God that Paul had been striving to fully carry out in his preaching. In other words, the word (or message) of God in verse 25 is a reference to the gospel; called the word of truth in verse 5 and the grace of God in verse 6.

Coming now to verses 26-27 we find yet another description of the gospel and from this description more reasons for which we ought to be in wonder of the gift of salvation; in wonder of the grace of God to us; and, in the words of 1:12, another cause for us to be giving thanks to the Father.

So our text is Colossians 1:26-27 and as we begin you might note that Paul equates the word of God as found in verse 25 as being a "mystery" in verses 26 and 27. But unlike the mystery of that sitcom episode that had no answer and no resolve, the mystery that Paul speaks of here has a glorious answer and should cause us to worship the Lord with joy and trembling and should also then affect the way we live our lives daily.

With this much said, let me offer you the big idea of our text. In Colossians 1:26-27 we see that for believers, *the gospel is no longer a mystery (something unknown or unrealized) but is rather a great wonder understood; a wonder that brings a great joy by which we praise God and give Him thanks, and which brings a great power by which we live for God.*

I. The gospel is the revealing of God's mystery (1:26)

[the word of God]...that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints...

Paul begins by telling us that the Word of God he preaches is "the mystery." The word "mystery" here speaks of some previously undisclosed truth; some undisclosed information. Paul is not saying that all of the Word of God is mystery, for the open words of Genesis 1:1 clearly tells us God is the Creator. To be sure, God is knowable in that He has disclosed everything needful to be in a right relationship with Him through Jesus Christ, but God is also infinite. There are things about God we do not know and cannot know; there are mysteries about God. Interesting enough, the idea in the word mystery implies that only those who have had the truth revealed to them can even know there was ever a mystery. In other words, there are mysteries of God that we do not know are mysteries. There are things about God that we do not even know that we should or could know.

This is important because sometimes, as we go back to the Old Testament and look what God said to Israel, we think they should have understood everything the way we understand them. To be sure, there were many things that Israel should have known about God and His plans but because of their sin, refused to know. But there are also truths in the Scriptures that were concealed, this mystery that has been hidden from past ages and generations, and things that could not be known until God revealed them.

Now, when Paul uses the word mystery, we need to remember that he had been speaking in the previous verses of the gospel, of the work of Christ on the cross to reconcile alienated,

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hostile sinners to God. When Paul uses the word “mystery” here and in other letters he wrote, it speaks of aspects of God’s plan of salvation that were previously unknown and undisclosed to previous generations. Let me give you the meaning of verse 26 – The mystery, that is, some previously undisclosed truth, truth that has been hidden or concealed in the past and continues to be concealed in the present, this truth is once and for all made known to the holy ones belonging to Him [to God]. There are a few implications we need to see.

1. That there are still those to whom the gospel is a mystery.

The verb tense and voice of **“has been hidden [concealed]”** tells us that some aspects of the truth of the mystery were present in the past, but concealed so as not to be understood and that it continues presently to be hidden or concealed to everyone who is not a holy one, a saint that belongs to God.

2. That something has happened to “His saints” by which the mystery of the gospel has been solved.

The second implication then is that something happened to “His saints” allowing them to perceive this mystery. And this is in fact what our text tells us as we read that the gospel has now been manifested, it has now been revealed to whom? To His saints, or to the holy ones belonging to Him. The word for “manifested” comes from a word meaning “to shine light on”. Have you every heard the phrase, “He really shed some light on that subject”? There’s the idea? Something that was dark and unseen has now had the light of God shine upon it so that, according or our text, the saints, all who believe on the Lord Jesus, would see it. It is God who opens our eyes to the truth. It is God who causes us to see our need of the gospel and to understand the mystery of it. It is God who has, once and for all manifested, made known, revealed, shed light upon the mystery of the gospel for His saints.

II. The gospel is the receiving of God’s wisdom (1:27a)

...to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles...

This leads us to looking at specifically what God has revealed to the saints. The gospel, the good news is that those who believe, these saints, these holy ones of His (1:26) have received, they have been made the recipients of God’s wisdom, this wisdom being the practical knowledge by which to understand and respond to the gospel. This tells us that the understanding needed to respond or believe in the gospel begins with and comes to us from God.

We read, **“to whom God willed”** - the word “willed” means to determine or even to prefer. We could read this, “to whom God determined” or “to whom God preferred” to make known. This is God’s action. The voice and tense in the text means that God once and for all willed to make known this mystery to His saints. Some commentators see Paul’s use of this word as a Hebrew idiom that means to delightfully or joyously will or desire to bring something to pass. God delightfully willed “to make know” – this is not the same word as “manifested” or “to shine light on” as found in verse 26. The word here means “to give meaning or practical understanding.” With reference to the gospel, God has delightfully willed for His saints that they have the practical understanding necessary to comprehend the mystery of it and then begin to

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live their lives in light of it. Beloved, if you know Christ it is because God first gave you the knowledge to know Him and to all whom God has given the knowledge of this mystery and have received His wisdom, these will be made holy ones. We see this throughout Scripture. In John 1:10-13 we read:

10 He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. 11 He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. 12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

We learn that the mystery of gospel is never discovered by man's ingenuity, or reasoning. Praise God that He delightfully willed; delightfully determined to make known to us (to give understanding, meaning; i.e. the wisdom) the practical knowledge by which to understand the mystery of the gospel. To the unbeliever, the gospel is still a mystery because we need God's wisdom given to us so we will believe. We read of this in 1 Corinthians 2:1-16.

1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of (human or earthly) wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, 4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of (human or earthly) wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; 7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; 8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; 9 but just as it is written, "THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM."

10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. 11 For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, 13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. 14 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. 15 But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one. 16 For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.

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The wisdom that leads to salvation is not humanly manufactured but rather is revealed and received from God. This is why we pray for God to open the eyes of the unbeliever, for until God does this, no persuasive speech or logical argument will bring a person into the kingdom of God. We have received wisdom from God about the mystery of the gospel and we are to speak of what is this mystery to others, but it will remain a mystery to them until God opens their eyes. Let us pray for open eyes!

But it is here that we begin to see what the mystery is. Paul calls it here in verse 27, "*the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles.*" Some take the word "glory" to be simply an adjective that describes riches, the glorious riches or abundant possessions. But given where Paul is taking us in this verse, it has to mean this and more. The word glory is a weighty word, rich in meaning and pictures for us here the very presence of God in our lives. The mystery that Paul speaks of is God's presence, the glory of the Lord.

I wish I had time to really develop all this, but follow me in a quick history lesson from the Old Testament. Often times in the Old Testament, the phrase, "the glory of the Lord" is used to describe God's gracious and awesome presence with His people. In Exodus 13:21 and 14:19, we read of the visible manifestation of the presence of God protecting Israel as they departed from Egypt being a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. In Exodus 40:32-35, with the completion of the tabernacle as built by Moses we read:

32 When they [Moses and Aaron] entered the tent of meeting, and when they approached the altar, they washed, just as the Lord had commanded Moses. 33 He erected the court all around the tabernacle and the altar, and hung up the veil for the gateway of the court. Thus Moses finished the work. 34 Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 35 Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

Israel had the blessing of seeing the glory of the Lord, the visible manifestation of His presence among them. In Number 14, after the people grumbled and complained against Moses after 10 of spies who gave an unfavorable report about taking the promised land, ignoring the report of Joshua and Caleb who said with God's presence they could take it, we read these statements Numbers 14:10-14, 19-21:

10 But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. Then the glory of the Lord appeared in the tent of meeting to all the sons of Israel. 11 The Lord said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst? 12 "I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they." 13 But Moses said to the Lord, "Then the Egyptians will hear of it, for by Your strength You brought up this people from their midst, 14 and they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land. They have heard that You, O Lord, are in the midst of this people, for You, O Lord, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. . .19 "Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now." 20 So the Lord said, "I have pardoned them

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according to your word; 21 but indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord.

At the dedication of Solomon's Temple we read once again of God's presence depicted as the glory of the Lord. In 2 Chronicles 7:1-3 we read:

1 Now when Solomon had finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the house. 2 The priests could not enter into the house of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled the Lord's house. 3 All the sons of Israel, seeing the fire come down and the glory of the Lord upon the house, bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave praise to the Lord, saying, "Truly He is good, truly His lovingkindness is everlasting."

After the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, the people and the prophets of Israel longed for the day when the temple could be rebuilt and the glory of the Lord would return to the temple. The glory of the Lord speaks of the physical and visible presence of the Lord. In Ezekiel 43:2-5 we see the prophet long for the presence of the Lord as we read:

1 Then he led me to the gate, the gate facing toward the east; 2 and behold, the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the way of the east. And His voice was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with His glory. 3 And it was like the appearance of the vision which I saw, like the vision which I saw when He came to destroy the city. And the visions were like the vision which I saw by the river Chebar; and I fell on my face. 4 And the glory of the Lord came into the house by the way of the gate facing toward the east. 5 And the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the house.

The prophets Zechariah and Haggai also looked forward to the day when the glory of the Lord would be present among God's people. In Zechariah 2:5, 10-11 we read:

5 'For I,' declares the Lord, 'will be a wall of fire around her, and I will be the glory in her midst.' 10 "Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst," declares the Lord. 11 "Many nations will join themselves to the Lord in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent Me to you.

And let us note that this expectation and promise extends even to the end of the New Testament as we read in Revelation 21:10-11; 23:

21:10-11 - And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. . .And

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the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb.

So, let us understand that the idea of the glory of the Lord is the presence of God among His people. That is what Israel longed for. But now back in our text of Colossians 1:27, we find that this glory, this presence of God would not be just for Israel, but also found where, "among the Gentiles". The mystery of the gospel is the revelation that both Jew and Gentiles would be able to experience the glory of the Lord. Does this not excite you? God would be with His people. And when God is with you or among you, what is it that you lack? We might say nothing, but our final point goes on to one more glorious truth.

III. The gospel is rejoicing in God's accomplishment (1:27b)

...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The gospel is not simply the glory of the Lord among us, as extraordinary as that is. But in addition to the presence of God among us, our great cause for rejoicing is that we have the presence of God in us. The mystery revealed is this, "***Christ in you, the hope of glory.***" Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, that is mind-blowing. Not only does Israel have a future in which the presence of the Lord, that is His glory will once again be manifested, but additionally, on top of that and to the our great wonder is the truth of God's presence in us, the deposit of Christ in us (a very large sum); and if Christ is in us, if you have experience this truth of a changed and transformed life because Christ, the glory of the Lord, is dwelling in you, your great hope; your sure confidence, is that you will dwell in the presence of God in heaven for ever and ever.

The great mystery that has been revealed is this; that rather than simply presiding over a temple of earth and stone, which He will do because it is prophesized in the Old Testament, that is the truth that was disclosed to Israel; but in addition to this, God's people will have Christ, God's glory dwelling in them. In 2 Corinthians 6:16 we read:

For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE."

The people of God are those in whom God dwells. And where God dwells there will be godliness and holiness of life. Remember our big idea, *the gospel is no longer a mystery (something unknown or unrealized) but is rather a great wonder understood; a wonder that brings a great joy by which we praise God and give Him thanks, and which brings a great power by which we live for God.*

You see, if we are God's people, if God does indeed dwell in us, then 2 Corinthians 6:17 speaks to us:

17 "Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.

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Our lives are to be affected, transformed. Our lives are to shine forth this mystery of Christ in us, our hope of glory! This is why Paul could say in Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

If Christ lives in you, then you have the power to live for God, a life lived by faith in the Son of God who dwells in you. Next week we will see how that worked itself out in the life of Paul, but for now let me simply ask you, have you come to know this mystery? Is Christ in you? Has the glory of the Lord, the riches of His glory taken up residence in your life? Is your heart turning more and more to following hard after Christ or are you trapped by the things of this world? Let us pray that God would reveal this mystery of Christ in you and that we would receive the wisdom needed to respond, to respond with a life that seeks to praise God and to live lives in the power of God for His glory.

Soli Deo Gloria

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