

Knowing Christ, the Mystery of God
Colossians 1:24-2:5
Key Verse: 2:2

"My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ...."

In today's passage Paul clearly states the goal of his letter. He wants the Colossians to know Christ, the mystery of God. Knowing Christ is quite different than knowing about Christ. Knowing about Christ is to have information about him in one's mind. Even computers can store information about Christ. There is no personal relationship. This kind of knowledge does not impact our lifestyle or being. In contrast, knowing Christ is very personal. It is to have a relationship with Christ and to experience his presence in a way that transforms our lives. In today's passage let's learn what it means to each of us to know Christ, and for our community as well.

We will study this passage based on two themes that permeate the entire text. The first is Paul's labor for the Colossian believers: his suffering (24), his motive and purpose (25,28-29), his goal and affection (2:1-2a,4-5). The second is Christ, the mystery of God: how it was revealed (26), the contents of the mystery (27), and its impact on believers (2:2b-3).

I. Paul's labor for the church (1:24-25, 28-29; 2:1-2a, 4-5)

First, Paul's suffering for the church (24). Apostle Paul was great for many reasons: his scholarly achievements, work ethic, and extraordinary passion. But perhaps his true greatness was in his suffering for the church. He said, "Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (24). Usually, people don't like to suffer. But Paul rejoiced in his suffering. Though he had suffered much, he felt that it was too small. So he wanted to fill up what was still lacking for the sake of the church. What does it mean that something was still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions? There are two kinds of afflictions or sufferings of Christ. The first is suffering for redemption. This is something that Christ accomplished all by himself. When Jesus said, "It is finished," from the cross, it meant that the price of sin had been fully paid once for all (Heb 10:10,14). This suffering of Christ was unique. No one can add to, subtract from, or cancel what Jesus did on the cross. His suffering for our redemption was sufficient, once for all. Because of his suffering, we are saved from our sins and our wounds are healed (1 Pe 2:24). The second kind of suffering is related to ministry, and is especially for the church. This suffering is ongoing and God's servants participate in it. That is why Jesus told his followers, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mk 8:34). When the Risen Christ met Paul, he said, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Ac 9:16). Paul told the Galatian believers, "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Ac 14:22). Sometimes we wonder why we have to sacrifice our time, energy, and money to care for unthankful and rebellious people. When we see no fruit, we feel that our life has been

consumed for nothing. We become like Isaiah, who asked, "How long, O Lord?" However, we should know that suffering for Christ and the church is meaningful. It shapes us in the character of Christ. When we participate in the suffering of Christ we will also share in his glory (1 Pe 4:13).

Second, Paul's motive and purpose in serving the Colossians (25,28-29). Paul worked hard and suffered a lot for the church because he had become its servant by the commission God gave him. The task the Lord gave him was to present the word of God in its fullness. God works for the church through servants of God, whom God commissions for his purpose. They should be faithful to this task and do it to please God, not men. This was Paul's motive.

What were the contents of Paul's teaching? In verse 28, we find that Paul proclaimed Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom (28). Here we learn a very important truth about teaching the Bible. The focus is the person Christ--not doctrines, morals, or religious rules. When we study the book of Acts, the Apostles preached Christ himself. Though they referred to Old Testament Scriptures, they always pointed to Christ, especially his death on the cross and resurrection. In John 5:39 Jesus told the religious leaders, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me...." All Scripture points to Christ (Lk 24:44; Jn 5:39). Christ is the center of the Bible. Wherever we go, whatever passage we teach from, God's servants should proclaim Christ. When we do so, people can meet Christ who can live in them and transform them. We see a good example of Christ-centered teaching in missions work in Korea. Missionary Arch Campbell lived and worked in Korea from 1916 until after the Korean War. He wrote a book called "The Christ of the Korean Heart."¹ In it, he says, "The Christians in Korea do not 'embrace Christianity.' They are not induced to try the Christian 'Way of Life.' They are not won over to a new religion. They are introduced to a Person--the most wonderful Person that ever lived--the most wonderful Person 'that ever liveth.' A Person who loved them before they heard of Him. A Person who loved them so much as to die for them. A Person who invites them into fellowship with Himself throughout all eternity. A Person who stands at the door and offers to 'come in and sup with them.' And they have opened the door and received."

What is the purpose of preaching Christ? Verse 28b says, "...so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ." That means to become like Jesus: to be as humble as Jesus, as loving as Jesus, as compassionate as Jesus, as patient as Jesus. The purpose of our disciple-making ministry is for us all to grow mature in Christ and to be like him. Paul worked hard for this task, not by his own strength, but with the powerful energy of Christ (29).

Third, Paul's goal in writing and his affection for the Colossians (2:1-2a,4-5). Look at 2:1-2a. "I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love...." Paul had not met the Colossian believers personally. His coworker Epaphras had pioneered the churches at Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis (4:13). However, Paul wanted them to know how hard he was contending for them. At that time, Paul was in prison and could not do anything for them physically. But upon

hearing of them from Epaphras, he accepted them in his heart, and he began to serve them as his own children. But what could he do from prison? First of all, he prayed for them. Truly we are limited by time and space. Our lives are so hectic that we often have no room to think about others. We are like prisoners confined to a cell. When we hear about God's children who are in trouble, what can we do? We can pray. Prayer is not limited by time and space. Even if we have no money, we can pray. Prayer is a powerful weapon, which taps the resources of Almighty God. Not only did Paul pray for them, he also wrote a letter to them. That letter became part of the Bible and has moved so many people's hearts--even ours today. We can write letters. We can do even more than write letters. We can e-mail, text, twitter, Facebook, and so on. We should not use these things to complain or commit sin and discourage others. Rather, we should use them to proclaim Christ and encourage others. Furthermore, Paul sent Tychicus to the Colossians to help them (4:7). Why did Paul struggle so much for the Colossians? Paul wanted them to be encouraged in heart. At that time, Paul needed encouragement. He was in prison. But he really wanted to encourage the Colossians. He also wanted them to be united in love. The character of Christian life is unity in love. When love is absent, the church is dead. When there is love, the church is made alive and strong.

Paul struggled hard to help the Colossians know Christ so that they might not be deceived by fine-sounding arguments (4). Though he was absent from them in the body, he was present with them in spirit (5a). He was delighted to see how disciplined they were, and how firm their faith in Christ was (5b). In short, he had Christ's affection for them. With the mind of Christ, he could embrace all kinds of people. As we see Paul in a Roman prison, yet overflowing with the affection of Christ, we wonder how it was possible. He had a treasure in his heart: Christ. Let's consider this treasure.

II. Christ, the mystery of God (1:26-27; 2:2b-3)

In today's passage, the word "mystery" is repeated three times (26,27; 2:2). Paul calls Christ, "the mystery of God." Why? How was this mystery revealed? What are its contents? What is the impact on those who know it? The character of a mystery is that it is a hidden secret. It can only be known by revelation. Without revelation, it is impossible to know this secret. Another characteristic of a mystery is that it is something valuable. We cannot say that a hidden bread crumb is a mystery. But a hidden treasure of gold and jewels is a mystery. Christ was hidden, and he is most valuable.

First, how the mystery of God was revealed (26). Verse 26 says, "...the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people." In this verse we can find God's way of working. In the beginning, right after the first man and woman sinned, God promised to send a Savior. We call this the primitive gospel (Gen 3:15). Later, God chose one man Abraham and revealed his plan to make his offspring a blessing to all nations on earth (Gen 12:3). This offspring referred to Christ Jesus (Gal 3:16). The events of Christ's life were foretold in the Scriptures: how he would be born (Mt 1:23), his name (Mt 1:21), his birthplace and what kind of ruler he would be (Mt 2:6), what kind of ministry he would carry out (Mt 11:4-5), how he would suffer and rise from the dead (Lk 24:46), his divinity (Isa 9:6, Mt 24:44), and so many other things.

Yet God did not reveal this great plan to many people (Gal 3:8; Ex 19:5-6; Ro 9:6-8). Only a few godly people knew. God did not reveal this plan all at once. It was a progressive revelation that unfolded event by event over many centuries (Rom 16:25-27). Then, when the time had fully come, God sent his Son (Gal 4:4). God revealed himself through his Son fully. In this way God fulfilled his promise. Why did God reveal his plan in this way? It is because the mystery is so profound and so amazing that no one can comprehend it. It is like the rising sun. When the sun first begins to shine, we only see small signs of it. But gradually it rises to illuminate the world fully. Then all the darkness disappears. We can see very clearly. Christ, who was a hidden mystery for many generations, has now been revealed to us very clearly.

Second, Christ in you, the hope of glory (27; 2:3). Let's read verse 27. "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." In this verse, "them" refers to the Lord's people. Among them are both Jews and Gentiles. The fact that Gentiles had become the Lord's people is amazing. The Gentiles were alienated from God, and foreigners to the covenants and promises, without hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:12). They were regarded as scum by the Israelites. But God chose to reveal to them the glorious riches of his mystery. Why did Paul call Christ "the glorious riches"? It is because in Christ there are all kinds of treasures, such as forgiveness of sins, adoption as God's children, inheritance in his eternal kingdom, provision for all our needs, protection from evil, wisdom and knowledge (2:3), membership in the body of Christ and fellowship with God's children, a glorious mission, the gift of the Holy Spirit who makes us fruitful, and so much more. Christ is the source of all these things. Whoever receives Christ suddenly becomes very rich, far richer than Bill Gates. Where is Christ? Christ is not far from us; he is in us. He dwells in us and is working to transform us into his image. Though we suffer from our sinful nature while in the body, gradually he changes us into his likeness. In the end, he will completely change us into his glorious image. We will be like him and live with him forever in the kingdom of God. This is our hope, the hope of glory. So we have a great treasure in our hearts. In 2 Corinthians 4:7, Paul refers to this as "treasure in jars of clay." Though Paul was in a crushing situation, he was not crushed. He was not in despair (2 Cor 4:8). He was always full of the Spirit because of the treasure in his heart. So he said, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16). What glorious riches we have in Christ! We are fully satisfied with Christ. How is this amazing grace possible? With man it is impossible. But with God it is possible. Another quotation from Campbell's book illustrates this. He writes: "There flashed through my mind the familiar story of the chemistry teacher who had his students bring him some of the filthiest mud they could find. The sample came from the scum by the side of the filthy stream running through the industrial part of the town. 'This sample is made up largely of five ingredients,' said the professor, 'clay, sand, soot, decomposed organic matter and water. We call it dirt. Man cannot do much with these substances but from them God can make beautiful things. From the clay He can make sapphires and rubies; from the sand, opals and agates; from the soot, diamonds; from the organic matter, roses; and from the water, snow. Man

cannot do it, but God can.' Yes, God could make jewels out of scum."2 Thank God who takes us as we are, like the scum, and transforms us into his precious jewels.

Third, knowing Christ, the mystery of God (2:2b). Verse 2b says, "...so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ...." Here, in most English versions of the Bible, "the full riches of complete understanding" is translated as "the full assurance of complete understanding." The Greek word for assurance appears three other times in the New Testament and is always translated in the same way (Heb 6:11,10:22; 1Th 1:5). Why do we need full assurance of complete understanding about Christ? It is to protect us from deception and to help us stand firm in our faith in Christ. Christ with his glorious riches, provides everything we need. When we hold firm to this truth, we can take root and grow and bear fruit. Paul's focal point in writing this letter was that the Colossians may know the mystery of God, namely Christ. Here we need to realize the importance of knowing Christ personally. As mentioned in the introduction, knowing Christ is different than knowing about Christ. Knowing Christ is not mere head knowledge but an encounter with the person Christ in mind, heart, soul and spirit. Knowing Christ is relational, not just emotionally, but holistically. Knowing Christ greatly impacts anyone who encounters him. When Paul found Christ he regarded everything a loss in order to gain Christ (Php 3:8). Those who find Christ willingly sell everything to gain Christ. Christ is like a hidden treasure.

One day an insurance salesman had an opportunity to sing in an NBC open stage. His song moved the hearts of people nationwide, and they praised him. Suddenly he became a famous star, and many contracts were waiting for him. His future was guaranteed with success and money. But he was filled with fear rather than joy. So he bowed down and prayed. His mother also prayed at the very time when he prayed. Then his mother left one small note on his table. It was a Christian poem by Rhea F. Miller, his mother's favorite. While reading the poem, he was moved by the Spirit and shed tears. He began writing what was coming into his mind. "I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold; I'd rather be His than have riches untold...I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause...." One day he sang this special song in Amsterdam in Netherlands where all Christian leaders of the world gathered together. After his song they all got up and praised him. But he said, "Thank you very much. But I do not want to exchange Christ with your applause and cheers." He is George Beverly Shea, Dr. Billy Graham's lifetime coworker.

While we are living in this world, we seek many things. What are they? Are they the most valuable things which cannot be exchanged for anything else? Christ, the mystery of God, is the glorious treasure and the source of everything we need. Christ is the one we should seek. When we have Christ in our hearts, we are the most blessed persons and the richest persons in the world, even though our worldly treasures may be few. On the other hand, even if we have many worldly treasures, if we do not have Christ in our hearts, we are very poor people. All the things we have will disappear, along with our bodies when we die. Let's know Christ. Let's hold on to Christ as our treasure in our hearts. Let's hold on to Christ as the treasure in our community.