**KNOWING CHRIST, THE MYSTERY OF GOD**

July 23, 2017

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.”

Ten years ago, Prime Time Productions produced a self-help video that flooded the internet and became a sensation. The video is a documentary that consists of a series of interviews that claims to reveal a secret that can provide you with happiness, fulfillment and success in life all for just $19.95. What is this secret law that will fulfill all your dreams and give you the keys to happiness, success and fulfillment? The secret can be described in four words, “The Law of Attraction.” The law of attraction is simply this: You attract into your life whatever you think. Think negative thoughts and you’ll attract negative forces into your life. Think positive thoughts and you’ll attract positive forces. Millions of people have bought into this so called secret and swear by it. It is interesting that something similar was happening when Paul wrote his letter to the Colossians. The Gnostic heresy was rampant in Colosse. The Gnostics claimed to have a secret knowledge or gnosis which would open up the way for salvation. Many Christians were deceived by this heresy. We find the same thing happening today. In today’s passage Paul tells us about the mystery of God. It is not a secret that was dreamed up by people but revealed by God. It is not a secret based on magic but the power of God. It is not a secret founded on some philosophical law but upon the living person of Jesus Christ. It is not a secret you can purchase for $19.95. Rather, if you are a Christian, it is a secret that is already within you.

**First**, the mystery of God, Christ in you. Look at verses 26-27. “…the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. 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.” Here mystery is not like the usual sense of an unsolved problem such as Sherlock Holmes’ murder mystery, or something beyond our understanding. Here the mystery is something revealed by God. This mystery is that Christ dwells in us. Let’s think for a moment how mind-boggling it is. We were alienated from God and were enemies in our mind because of our evil behavior. We were in deep despair without hope in the dominion of darkness. But now God has reconciled us through Jesus’ death on the cross to make us holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

In the Old Testament, God spoke through the angels, his messengers, for example, to Hagar and Daniel. The OT saints didn’t have the indwelling Spirit of God. But in the New Testament, we have something much better than a vision or an angel. We have the final Word of God, and the Spirit of God to guide us! Hagar didn’t have it. Daniel didn’t have it. Isaiah didn’t have it. We have the completed Word of God which Paul says is for our instruction, and the Spirit helps us understand it! Some cults like Mormon say that ‘an angel’ gave them their vision or revelation. Or some claim that they have found missing books of the Bible, or other books God intended for us such as the Gospel of Thomas. They say that we need to know the secret knowledge to go to the next level. It is all false. We are complete in Christ, and we only need to know Christ. In that sense we are more blessed than Daniel and the Old Testament prophets. Jesus said in Luke 10:23-24, “Then he turned to his disciples and said privately, ‘Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. For I tell you that many prophets and kings wanted to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.’”

The mystery is that “Christ lives in you.” This secret is now available to every Christian. Christ lives in you. The creator of the universe has made His house and home within your life! And because Christ lives in us, we have the assurance that we will share in Christ’s glory.

Have you watched home renovation show on TV? It is amazing how they could take an old and crumbling structure and turn it into a beautiful house that anyone would want to live in. But the change doesn’t happen overnight. They have to remove the rotting boards and crumbling drywall and replace them with new lumber and drywall. Sometimes they have to take out rotted pipes and replace them with new ones. Old fixtures, tiles and appliances have to be taken out and replaced. Walls have to be sanded down and repainted with several coats of new paint. The refurbishing doesn’t happen overnight. It takes a lot of time and a lot of work. That is exactly what Christ does within us. When we invite him in, Christ takes the ownership and moves into our lives and changes our heart, the foundation. We call that justification. Then Christ starts the long refurbishing process of changing our lives completely; gradually removing the old destructive habits that have plagued our lives and replacing them with new, godly habits. We call this sanctification. Drunkenness, dishonesty and pleasure-seeking desires are replaced by honesty, prayer, Bible-study. The desire to serve ourselves is replaced by a hunger and desire to serve God. Christ gets out the old in our lives and replaces it with the new. As Paul once wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away, all things become new.” (2 Cor. 5:17)

Look at verse 27 again. “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.” Jesus 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!

**Second**, Paul rejoiced in the sufferings of Christ. Look at verse 24. “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.” What did Paul 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 building up his church. Here church is not a physical building, but body of believers. Christ is the head of church, his body. The head in heaven feels the sufferings of his body on earth. 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). Building a church is not easy. Look at verses 28-29. “He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.” Those who follow Christ must mature and must grow up. To be mature is to be like Christ more and more. Our lives are to be more like Christ today than last week and when we meet together next Sunday, our lives should be more like Christ than they are today. One theologian says, “When a man is led through the waters of salvation, they are ankle deep at first. But as he progresses, they become knee deep, and they reach to the loins and are finally impassible except by swimming.” Likewise, we should grow up spiritually.

Someone said, “Everyone is a saint by himself/herself. But in a community his/her sin is exposed and must be dealt with.” So helping someone to mature takes a lot of time and effort. It takes admonishing and teaching. Admonishing means we encourage and instruct one another and when necessary confront one another. Sometime it takes warning about sin and a misguided life. It means that we lovingly get in one another’s faces about sin, false doctrine and a complacent spirituality. It means that we love one another so much that we call one another to a higher standard and that we don’t let one another wallow in spiritual weakness and superficial living. This implies that we should be involved in one another’s lives. It means that we should do more than just saying, “How are you?” But often it involves misunderstanding and suffering, risking friendship. Our Bible students sometimes do not understand our efforts to help them mature. 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. 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).

**Third**, Paul’s goal in writing and his affection for the Colossians (2:1-2a,4-5). Look at verses 2:1-2a. “I want you to know how hard I am struggling 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.” 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.

Some people often express doubts about their salvation, even though they have been to church regularly. Their primary problem is not a lack of knowledge, but a failure to apply the truths they know. Look at verse 2 again. “My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love.” King James Version says, “That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love.” In order to grow in knowledge of Jesus Christ, we are knit together in love. Paul is trying to create a beautiful quilt by sewing the hearts of individuals together with the threads of love, especially his own love as he suffers there in prison. But there is something very unusual about this quilt. When love knits hearts together into a beautiful quilt of unity, the result is not merely stronger affection, but also stronger understanding. This is one of the great and strange facts of Christianity: a deep and confident understanding of Christ comes not merely from thinking, but also from loving. In other words the way to get assured understanding about the mystery of God, namely, Jesus Christ the treasure chest of wisdom, is to have your heart knit together in love with other believers. The deepest and most certain insights into the character of God and the wisdom of God come into heads that are attached to loving hearts.

Look at verse 2b. “...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.” Sometimes we wonder, “How is it possible to have the complete understanding of Christ?” But when we are united in love, God gives us the full assurance that we will have the complete understanding. Then it protects 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. Then they can be freed from hollow and deceptive philosophy and human commands and teachings. They can live a life worthy of the Lord and please God in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.