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Colossians 1:24–2:5
8th Message
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AN UNLIKELY SERVANT

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

Today is a very special Sunday because we have received a letter from the apostle Paul. Let me read it to you:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ at Cupertino,

When Epaphras gave me the report on how you are doing, my heart was filled with joy and gratitude to God. It is so exciting to hear of the faith, love, and hope that has grown out of your new relationship with Jesus. Can you believe it? You were living in darkness, worshipping idols. You had no hope or knowledge of God. But when you heard the gospel from Epaphras you believed and were transferred into the kingdom of light, reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus, and cleansed from all your sin. Praise God and Hallelujah!

I hope that one day I will be able to meet you all, but I pray for you constantly that you might know more fully the rich treasure you have in Christ and appropriate this treasure into your daily lives, bubbling over with the very life of Jesus. Isn't it amazing how the gospel bears fruit in our lives? Not only has it taken root in Cupertino, but also it keeps happening in city after city, country after country. My desire is to spread the word about Jesus throughout the entire world so that every person might know about the supremacy and majesty of Jesus Christ. Nothing can stop this spreading flame.

I have a few things I want to warn you about because I have heard about some influences that might distract you from keeping your focus on Christ. But I will write more about this in the coming weeks.

Greet Brian and the men of Wednesday morning. Tell Shawn I have heard about his wonderful preaching all the way here in Rome.

Your brother in Christ,

Paul

We are back in Colossians and will be for the weeks leading up to Easter and beyond. Paul's letter to us at PBCC sums up much of what we have discussed thus far in our studies in Colossians.

We might remember that Colossae was a town in the Lycus Valley in Asia Minor. Nearby were the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. All three of these villages were evangelized by Epaphras while Paul was teaching in Ephesus. The church in Colossae was probably not a large church and the believers there were Gentiles, saved from paganism.

We pick up our study in chapter 1, verse 24. The next section is comprised of verses 1:24 through 2:5. It is a rather large section but it hangs together as a unit. Let me read the text in its entirety:

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. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—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. We proclaim him, 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. 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, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is. (TNIV)

It is easy to see why this section of the letter is a unit by the repeated uses of first person pronouns "I" and "we." Verse 23 ends with the change in subject from "you" to "I" when Paul writes about being a servant of the gospel: "This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant." With the idea that Paul is a servant of the gospel, he begins this autobiographical section of the letter. There are three themes I want to address in this section in three successive weeks: Paul's mission and message, Paul's ultimate goal for every believer and how that is accomplished, and Paul's willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Today our study centers on Paul's mission and message and how that might apply to our lives.

Most of you are familiar with Paul's story. Paul, formerly Saul, was the cream of the crop among the Pharisees and was seeking to stamp out the Way, those who were avid followers of Jesus. On one occasion, as he was approaching Damascus a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground, and he heard a voice, say: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" The voice came from Jesus and we might note that when Paul persecuted followers of Jesus he persecuted Jesus himself. Paul realized he was blind and he remained that way for three days until a very hesitant, fearful Ananias was instructed by the Lord to go to where Saul was staying. When Ananias entered the house he laid his hands on Saul. Immediately, something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight and was baptized.

Immediately the converted Paul began to preach the gospel to the Jews. But eventually God revealed to him a wider mission – to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. This is the very thing God spoke to Ananias when Paul was converted and what Paul says in verses 25-27:

I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—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.

Let's unpack these verses. What was revealed to Paul and to the disciples was a "mystery." Paul uses this word twenty-one times in his

writings, four times in Colossians and three times in our text. In the Old Testament and Jewish thought, the mystery was connected with the last days, with “God’s purpose to be revealed at the end-time.”¹ This is how the word is used in Daniel (2:28-29). This mystery was hidden in past generations. Even though Israel anticipated the Messiah and the day of the Lord, nobody could pin down the particulars. However, God had a plan and throughout history he managed his plan according to his timetable. The word here, “commission,” is misleading. Literally it is a word used to describe the manger of a household and thus stewardship. Paul was a steward of the mystery of God, God’s plan of salvation through his son for the world.

The Mystery is Christ

Paul tells us several things about this mystery. First, the content of the mystery is Christ; not *Christ and*, not *Christ or*, not *Christ but*. Paul makes that clear here in verse 27 and again in 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.

The mystery is not an idea, or a thing, or a principle. The mystery is a person. The mystery of God centers on the person of Christ. Jesus is the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. He is Lord and Savior. Jesus came to a particular place, at a particular time, for a particular reason. God orchestrated everything. “Christ himself is God’s mystery revealed.”²

The Mystery is Christ for the World

Second, the mystery revealed in Christ is that salvation has now come to the Gentiles, to the nations. Christ didn’t come just for Israel, but also for the world. When Christ ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God, humanity entered into the last days. What was anticipated in Isaiah 49:6 became present reality:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

With the coming of Christ, Jew and Gentile were brought together to form one body, one people of God through union with Christ. A Gentile no longer needed to become a Jew in order to become part of the people of God. The blessing for the nations promised through Abraham and through Israel had become a reality.

The mystery of salvation in Christ was made known to the saints, to the ones that God wanted to make it known, like the ones living in Colossae. To this end Paul became a servant, both a servant of the gospel (v. 23), and a servant of the church, the new humanity formed in Christ. Paul’s mission was to proclaim and preach this mystery to the Gentiles and thus fulfill or make full the word of God. Paul’s message was Christ and the inauguration of a new covenant in Christ. O’Brien writes: “The Word of God is ‘fulfilled’ not simply when it is preached in the world, but when it is dynamically and effectively proclaimed in the power of the Spirit throughout the world, and accepted by men in faith.”³ Thus the mystery is both Christ and Christ for the world.

The Mystery is a Treasure of Wealth and Glory

Third, the mystery of Christ is magnificent in every way. Paul describes the mystery as “glorious riches of this mystery” or literally “the riches of the glory of this mystery.” The word “riches” speaks of

the abundant wealth of God, and in Ephesians Paul uses this word to describe “the lavish bestowal of his blessings in Christ.” The word glory is used in the Old Testament to describe the splendor of God Himself. Paul is using both of these words to speak of the “immense greatness of the mystery.”⁴

The Mystery is Christ in You

Fourth, the mystery of Christ is further described as “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” The “you” here refers to the Christians in Colossae. Christ dwells not just among them but is in them as Gentile believers. They had the life of Christ within them resulting in the hope of glory. Paul talked about hope in verse 5: “...the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true word of the gospel that has come to you.”

The coming of Christ brought a new dimension for God’s people. The life of Christ indwells believers; the very life of God is within us. And with this life there is a hope for future glory, a time when Christ comes again, when the new heavens and earth appear, and we become like Christ fully and share in the glory of God. There will be a day when believers will experience and share in the full splendor and majesty of God. Our hope is not in wealth or possessions, in power or status, in human glory or achievement, or even in living a long life. Our hope is what awaits us, now that we are in Christ and Christ is in us.

In the book of Ephesians Paul writes that union between Christ and the church is a great mystery, as he compares the relationship with marriage. And being a mystery is it not easy to put all of this in a nice neat box. Let me try to give an analogy.

Suppose that you discovered a map to a hidden treasure. This treasure was known to exist for centuries, but no one had found it. With your map in hand you launched a campaign to locate the treasure. All of your friends thought you were crazy and your family disowned you, but you were determined. After several months the map led you to an underground cave filled not only with riches but also with documents that explained the history of the world. (Sounds like a movie you may have seen, right?) Now here is the kicker. Not only were you able to obtain riches for this life, but you were given an IOU that guaranteed a future wealth that made the present wealth almost nothing.

The gospel is like a treasure map, so to speak, that leads people to a great treasure and reveals a great mystery. But it is no longer a secret. God is not hiding anything. He is making himself known to every corner of the world.

Paul always wanted to be a servant of God even when he was trying to stop the spread of Christianity. He was just serving God in the wrong way. But after his conversion Paul was given a mission to preach the mystery of God to the nations, thus inaugurating the last days. The content of Paul’s message was Christ and Christ alone. There was nothing else needed since all of God’s wealth and glory resided in his Son.

Now, for most of you this is old hat. You know well that Jesus is for the world and that there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. But it was a big problem in the first century, and much of the New Testament deals with the tensions that arose over the issue of what was necessary to become part of the people of God. And we will talk about some of these things when we get into chapter 2.

But for now we ask, how does Paul’s life mission help us grow or mature in Christ? How does Paul’s mission and message change, convict, or encourage us? Let me suggest two things.

First, no one is beyond reach for God's service. Think about Paul. Who would have chosen Paul to be God's spokesman for the Gentiles? It made no logical sense. Paul was persecuting Christians and putting them in jail. But that is what God often does. Humans would choose the strong, the intelligent, the wise, and the lovely. God on the other often chooses the weak, the absurd, the ridiculous, and the foolish. Just consider God's choice of David. Saul was the people's choice. He had all the external qualifications. When God sent Samuel to David's home, David's father brought out all of his sons who were likely choices. David was not included. David was the runt of the litter, the unlikely choice. But it was David who had a heart for God. We can think of other examples, such as Moses, Gideon, Barak, Rahab, Ruth, and Peter. Which one of us would have given Peter a second chance? God's choice of a person often defies logic. But there are no limits to whom God might choose and use for his purposes.

Let me suggest something – all of us, each one of us is a servant of the gospel, a steward of the mystery of God. We are all engaged in full-time ministry. How would this change our lives? What might be holding us back from offering ourselves in service of God?

Perhaps we think we are disqualified. Our sin in the past was too great and we still carry a heavy burden of shame and guilt. Consider Paul who describes himself as the foremost of sinners.

Perhaps you think you are not adequate – you're not smart enough or don't have a charismatic personality or you have low self-esteem. Inadequacy is the primary requirement for being a servant of God. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians,

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:5–6 NAS95)

Perhaps you feel like you don't have anything to offer. Well, if you have understood what I have said about the mystery of Christ you have a rich treasure to offer.

Perhaps you think that being a servant of God is for professionals. But that is totally counter to the idea of the ministry of the saints. Each of us is gifted for works of service.

Perhaps your hope is for glory here and now and for the hope stored up in heaven. Then we need a deep sense of conviction to let go of the things of this world and trust in God.

When I think about unlikely choices I can't help think about what is happening in New York with Jeremy Lin. Even if you aren't a sports fan, you have to love what has happened with this young man. Lin went to Palo Alto High School. He was a good student and a very good basketball player. But Stanford didn't want him, so he went to Harvard. Coming out of college he was undrafted and unwanted by professional basketball. He spent some time with the Golden State Warriors, but they let him go. He then went to Houston and the Rockets let him go. Somehow he ended up with the New York Knicks and because of injuries, Jeremy Lin got his chance. And he made the most of it, scoring more points in his first four games as a starter than anyone else in the modern era. He has set New York on fire, and since he is an Asian American, people in China wake up every morning to see what he has done. The really cool thing is that Jeremy is a strong believer in Jesus Christ. In sharp contrast to many professional athletes, Jeremy is humble and modest. He simply trusts the Lord. Talk about an unlikely candidate.

Why does this delight us? It is because we feel like unlikely choices and candidates for God's work. But we forget one thing – we have a powerful and mighty God that uses each of us for his purposes.

Second, God may call us to a place and people that are very different from what we may have chosen for ourselves. Think about Paul. He was a Jew and wanted to preach the gospel to the Jews. But God redirected him to be a missionary to the Gentiles. In other words, the places where Paul went and the people he ministered to were not his first inclination. He could have never anticipated how God might use him.

I grew up going to church every Sunday but it wasn't until the end of college that I had my Damascus road experience. After living in darkness most of my college life I had a deep desire to be used by God on my college campus, the University of Nebraska. I came to California and when I began to get very involved in ministry and even when I came on staff at PBC I envisioned that God would take me back to be his servant on the Nebraska campus. I had a passion to preach the gospel there. At one point I even got a call from a church in Lincoln, but it was not the right time or the right fit.

I really didn't think I would be in California the rest of my life. The weather isn't bad, but there are too many people and lousy public golf courses. But God had his plan. I had to plant myself in the here and now. The ironic thing is that one of the young men in 20s went on to seminary and is now a pastor in Lincoln, Nebraska. Maybe I had a small part.

Sometimes we hold ourselves back because we aren't where we are supposed to be. We are waiting for things to line up, to fall into place according to our expectations and plans. But God often trumps our plans. What if Paul told God that he didn't want to be a minister to the Gentiles? Where would any of us be now?

We are all servants of God. How would our life change if that were how we saw ourselves? God calls us to a particular place, at a particular time, for a particular reason. All that is required on our part is to be available and teachable and perhaps to pray for God to remove the scales from our eyes. God will do the rest as he empowers us through the Holy Spirit.

The mystery of God is Christ, Christ for the world, an abundant treasure that indwells his people. Let us close this morning, praising the Christ who is our only hope, our hope of glory.

Blessed be our God who has revealed the mystery of his Son to us and who makes us servants by the power of the Holy Spirit proclaiming the message of Christ to the world and bringing light into the darkness.

1 Peter O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 84.

2 O'Brien, 94-95.

3 O'Brien, 83.

4 O'Brien, 86.

