

Colossians 1:24-2:5

Week 4 - Mystery Of The Ages

Learning Objectives

- Consider how Paul's suffering impacted his ministry.
- See how – in the midst of Paul's suffering – he was able to encourage the church (even a church he had never met in person).
- Look at the gospel with the same sense of mystery and awe as the early Church.

? If you could have endless energy for one thing, what would it be and why?

Pray for your time together.

Read Out Loud: Colossians 1:24-2:5 (NIV)

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. ²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. 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.

²⁸ He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

² 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. 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, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. ⁵ 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.

"...what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions"
This difficult phrase (from verse 24) might refer to the hardships traditionally expected to befall the Messiah's people in advance of His return (sometimes called the "messianic woes"). The idea behind this tradition was that a certain amount of suffering was necessary before God's people would be vindicated. Paul may be referring to this remainder of afflictions that the Church must endure. He considers his own sufferings to represent some portion of this remainder; in this way, he is suffering on behalf of the Church (compare 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10; Phil 3:10). Alternatively, Paul may see his own suffering as the visible reenactment of the sufferings of Christ, so that others would be able to see Christ's love for them more clearly.
Source: Faithlife Study Bible

? Verse 24 can be a challenge to parse, but we know from our previous studies that Paul is writing this letter from prison. How does Paul view suffering? What gives him this perspective?

Possible Answer: Paul's suffering is like Christ's in that he has been imprisoned for spreading the Gospel, but at the same time Paul sees his suffering as minimal in comparison to what Christ endured in his suffering for us on the cross for our salvation. This perspective gives him joy as he shares in Christ's suffering and knows that even though he suffers his work is spreading the news of who Christ is.

? How should our Christian perspective change the way we deal with suffering compared to how the world reacts to suffering?

Possible Answer: We, like Paul, can find comfort in knowing that Christ's suffering was greater than our own. We also know that our circumstances here on earth are only temporary and our ultimate hope rests in Christ and the promises of the Gospel. Without this perspective we might reach a point of desperation in the midst of suffering, a feeling of hopelessness.

? How can we turn our suffering into a proclamation of the gospel? Have you ever had the opportunity to share the gospel as a result of your own hardship or suffering?

Possible Answer: Finding joy in our current suffering reveals Christ to those around us. We can explain to people in our lives why we are not crushed by our circumstances or struggles. Knowing that we don't have to save ourselves from sin and suffering lifts a large burden from our shoulders.

What is the mystery hidden for ages?
Paul says that a mystery had been "kept hidden for ages and generations." All through the Old Testament there are references to Christ – the Jews were waiting for a Messiah. The prophets spoke of Christ without knowing exactly what His' salvation would look like. Early Jewish Christians would have keenly understood the "mystery" of the gospel because of the way their religion separated them from God. They were not used to being in direct relationship with God and relied on their religious leaders and rules to provide access to God. The Gentiles' only exposure to God would have been through their observance (if any) of the Jewish religious practices. The gospel was fresh and new to both groups. For those who accepted it, they would have been blown away by God's Grace.

? Paul tells the church that the mystery being revealed to them is Christ *in* them. What does this mean?

Possible Answer: When Jesus died on the cross and was resurrected it reconciled us to God. Christ's death absolves us of our sin and allows us to enter into a relationship with God.

? In our current culture, why do you think it might be harder to approach the gospel with the same sense of mystery and wonder as the early Christian Church?

Possible Answer: Answer will vary. Potential themes: salvation could be assumed in the U.S. because we have a history of Christianity. Americans look to other things to save them. Comfort could prevent us from seeking salvation.

? Going back to verse 25, Paul says he is the church's servant. Based on what you know of Paul from this passage and previous studies (i.e. Acts), what does Paul's servanthood look like?

Possible Answer: After his conversion, Paul dedicates his whole life to spreading the gospel and planting churches. Everything he does is aimed at telling people about Christ regardless of the consequences. He was beaten and imprisoned many times because of this work, but it never stopped him from continuing his work.

? What insight does verse 29 give us into how Paul is able to relentlessly serve the church?

Possible Answer: Paul is serving the church through the power of Christ in him, not his own human energy and power. Paul would probably have given up long ago if he were just working through his own human grit rather than God.

? Looking at verses 1 through 5, how is Paul effectively encouraging the church?

Possible Answer: Even though Paul has never met them in person, he is rooting for them. He reminds them to be united in love and then affirms their discipline in the gospel. Paul reminds them to be on the lookout for deceivers and their old ways of thinking. Paul has goals for the church that he thinks they can achieve, such as having solid relationships with God and each other.

? How are Paul's goals for the church at Colossae still valuable to our modern church?

Possible Answer: Paul is describing a community that is supportive of one another and finds solidarity in their love for each other and God. This community would not be divided over petty issues and would have each other's best interests at heart. Their unique understanding of love through the lens of the Gospel would further unify them.

? How does Paul's mission for the Church make it easier to understand and know Christ?

Possible Answer: If a community truly wants to love each other well they will have to look to Christ and the Gospel. None of us are really deserving of love and we will let each other down. The only way we can love each other well and find encouragement is by understanding what the Gospel has already done for each of us. If we experience Gospel community we will inherently have a better understanding of God.

For Discussion and Accountability

? What suffering are you currently facing? How can the Gospel energize you to encourage others in the midst of that suffering?

? Would people look at your relationship with God and say that they “delight to see how disciplined you are and how firm your faith in Christ is”? What steps could you take toward living that out?