

Glorious Riches

Devotional Reading: Galatians 3:19–29
Background Scripture: Colossians 1:19–2:5

Colossians 1:24–2:3

24 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:

25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;

26 Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

27 To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:

28 Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:

29 Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.

1 For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh;

2 That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ;

3 In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Key Text

That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.—Colossians 2:2–3

Hope in the Lord

Unit I: Experiencing Hope

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the “mystery.”
2. Explain why Paul discusses the “mystery.”
3. State a way to pass along spiritual comfort that he or she once received during a time of distress.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Moving to a New House
- B. Lesson Context

I. Paul’s Status (Colossians 1:24)

- A. In Suffering (v. 24a)
- B. For the Church (v. 24b)

II. Paul’s Intent (Colossians 1:25–29)

- A. By Design of God (v. 25)
- B. For Maturity of Believers (v. 26)
(Re) solving Mysteries
- C. In Hope of Glory (v. 27)
- D. With Goal-Directed Wisdom (v. 28)
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III. Paul’s Labor (Colossians 2:1–3)

- A. Everywhere (v. 1)
- B. Everyone (v. 2)
- C. Everything (v. 3)

Conclusion

- A. Then and Now
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

ColosseKo-lahss-ee.

EpaphrasEp-uh-frass.

LaodiceaLay-odd-uh-see-uh.

polytheisticpohl-ih-thee-iz-tik.

Introduction

A. Moving to a New House

It's not fun to move. Preparing boxes and furniture for movers is a lot of work! But moving old things or dragging old pictures out of the basement can bring pleasant memories back to life, providing comfort during these times of transition. According to professional movers, it's a good idea to use this opportunity to assess everything you own.

The people of the church at Colosse hadn't made a physical move, but a spiritual one. Those of Gentile background had moved from their polytheistic (meaning "many gods") outlook to acknowledge the one, true God. Those of Jewish background had been challenged to move on from the Law of Moses that had defined their existence. Both groups were moving into a new "house"—the same house! That house was and is known as the church.

Predictably, some folks brought old, obsolete "stuff" with them that didn't belong in the church. At best, it was just useless clutter; at worst, it could lead a person to make another move—a move out of the church. If anyone had good reason to leave the church, it was the apostle Paul (see Philippians 3:4–6). Today's lesson lets us glimpse his level of commitment.

B. Lesson Context

Colossians and Philemon are two of the four letters we call the Prison Epistles, the other two being Ephesians and Philippians. Paul wrote them from prison in Rome in the early AD 60s. There is no indication that Paul planted the church in Colosse (Colossians 2:1). Instead, a certain Epaphras probably did so after Paul had visited nearby towns (1:3–8; 4:12). According to most scholars, the church in Colosse was likely planted as a result of Paul's third missionary journey (Acts 18:23–21:16). Paul refers to the nearby towns of Hierapolis and Laodicea in Colossians 2:1; 4:13–16.

The congregations of Paul's day faced the dual threat of their members returning either to pagan deities or to superseded Jewish practices (Romans 7:6; etc.). A more insidious heresy was *syncretism*—a blending of old beliefs and practices with new ones. Teachers of this system would say something like, "Having Christ is important, but to be saved, you also need...." That sentence might be completed by one or more Jewish practices of the Law of Moses. Or it might be finished with speculative elements of Greek philosophy. Both seemed to have been problems at Colosse per Colossians 2:8–15. But before he confronted those problems, Paul first needed to ensure that his readers understood his own status, intent, and work.

I. Paul's Status

(Colossians 1:24)

A. In Suffering (v. 24a)

24a. Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you.

By use of the word *who*, Paul refers to himself, as the closing phrase of the previous verse indicates. From the outset, Paul's ministry was to be characterized by *sufferings* (Acts 9:16). That reality is a recurring theme in his letters (2 Corinthians 1:5–7; 6:3–10; 11:23–27; Ephesians 3:13; Philippians 3:10; 2 Timothy 1:12; 3:11; etc.). But Paul was not complaining about random

aches and pains as we might do. Rather, his sufferings had a purpose: they were *for you*, as the next thought indicates.

B. For the Church (v. 24b)

24b. And fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church.

As we read this half-verse, we may come away with more questions than answers! What does *fill up* mean in this context? How can Paul be so bold as to connect his own sufferings to *the afflictions of Christ*? How can Paul's sufferings be a benefit to the believers in Colosse (that is, *for his body's sake*)? Recognizing that the word *behind* refers to something lacking (as it does in the English translation of the same Greek word in 1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 11:9), what is the "lack" in the afflictions of Christ that Paul's sufferings fill up?

Dealing with the last question first, Paul is crystal clear elsewhere in this letter that there is nothing lacking about Christ's afflictions regarding what they were intended to accomplish (Colossians 2:9–15; compare Romans 6:9–10; Hebrews 7:27; 9:12, 28). One proposal is that the phrase *in my flesh* is the key to understanding here: that which is lacking completeness is not Christ's sufferings in and of themselves, but rather it is Christ's sufferings in Paul that are not yet complete. The church is the body of Christ, and Paul suffered for that body as he traveled around the Mediterranean world to preach the truth of the gospel. As more sufferings came his way, they filled up what the Lord had predicted in Acts 9:16.

What Do You Think?

What do Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12:1–10 suggest about enduring suffering?

Digging Deeper

What factors affect how you counsel someone who is experiencing ongoing suffering? Keep Job 42:1–8 in mind.

II. Paul's Intent

(Colossians 1:25–29)

A. By Design of God (v. 25)

25a. Whereof I am made a minister.

This is now the second time Paul has identified himself as a *minister* in this letter (the first time is in Colossians 1:23). This self-identification is quite similar to his statements in Ephesians 3:2, 7–8. The English word translated "minister" comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, from which we also derive the word *deacon*. Paul is not using this word to refer to an office of the church (as he does in 1 Timothy 3:8, 12). Rather, he is depicting himself as a "servant," which is how the word is translated in Matthew 23:11; Mark 9:35; John 12:26; and elsewhere.

25b. According to the dispensation of God which is given to me.

The dispensation of God of which Paul speaks is recorded in Acts 9:15; 22:14–15; and 26:16–18. We could call those passages Paul's "mandate" or "marching orders."

What Do You Think?

In what ways was Paul's commission by God similar to and different from your own?

Digging Deeper

Compare and contrast your commission with the accounts found in Matthew 28:19–20; Acts 9:15; 22:14–15; and 26:16–18.

25c. For you, to fulfil the word of God.

The phrase *for you* establishes the believers at Colosse to be the beneficiaries of Paul's tasks; the phrase *to fulfil the word of God* establishes the benchmark by which to measure the accomplishment of those tasks. Both facts are stated in very general terms here. This serves as an introduction to specifics, which we will see below.

B. For Maturity of Believers (v. 26)

26. Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints.

Paul uses the word *mystery* numerous times in his letters in different ways. The passages that are closest to the usage of that word in the verse before us are Romans 16:25–26; 1 Corinthians 2:7; and Ephesians 3:3–9. In those, as here, the word refers to the content of Paul's preaching that is foundational: the good news of Jesus, once hidden but now revealed. In doing so, Paul was drawing on Jewish ideas about the mystery of God's plans, which culminate in Christ. It's possible that Paul's audience, especially the Gentiles, heard a contrast between God's mystery with the "mystery religions" of the Greco-Roman world.

The gospel message of Jesus Christ indeed was a mystery until it began to be disclosed by Jesus (compare 1 Timothy 3:16). But even though He brought, modeled, and explained the gospel message personally, people often did not comprehend (examples: Matthew 16:5–12; Mark 7:17–18; John 14:9), even right up to the day of His ascension (Acts 1:6).

Broadly speaking, the gospel message deals with two issues: (1) the *person* of Christ and (2) the *work* of Christ. The four Gospels (that is, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) focus almost wholly on the "person" issue; they are concerned primarily with evidence and belief that Jesus was (and is) the divine Son of God (John 20:30–31; etc.). The meaning and significance of Jesus' "work"—referring primarily to why His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension were (and are) essential—are largely unaddressed in the Gospels. A rare exception is Mark 10:45: "the Son of man came ... to give his life a ransom for many." Even there, however, there's no explanation of who the ransom is to be paid to and how the ransom actually works.

The meaning and significance of Jesus' work received full treatment after His ascension as the apostles received further revelation and the rest of the New Testament was written (examples: Acts 10; Galatians 1:11–12). In that sense, the mystery *now is made manifest to his saints*—the word *saints* referring to all Christians.

(Re)solving Mysteries

When my husband and I started having children, we didn't agree on much. But there was one thing we both felt very strongly about: keeping the gender of our unborn children a mystery until the day of the birth.

The nine months of anticipation were exciting and well worth the wait! Even while friends and family expressed frustration and exasperation at being kept in the dark about our baby's gender, we did not relent. And when each of our babies was born, the revelation at the end was every bit as rewarding as we could have imagined.

God doesn't reveal His mysteries to us on our timetable but on His (Daniel 12:8–9; Acts 1:7; 1 Peter 1:10–12; etc.). But we want to know! And our unholy desire can lead to all kinds of problems. These range from professional embarrassment (remember the booklet *88 Reasons the Rapture Will Be in 1988?*) to divine condemnation (see 1 Corinthians 6:9).

Despite desires and attempts to unravel earthly or heavenly mysteries, the main question is this: *What are you doing with the mysteries God has already revealed?*

—P. M.

C. In Hope of Glory (v. 27)

27. To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

In Greek, this verse is a continuation of the preceding verse rather than the beginning of a new sentence. The phrase *among the Gentiles* acknowledges the inclusiveness of the gospel message. Not all Gentiles accepted the message, of course, even though the truth of *this mystery* was available to them. Paul wants his readers to make no mistake regarding the content of the mystery: it's *Christ*. Not only Christ in and of himself, but Christ *in you*. Not only is Christ in us (2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20; 4:19; Ephesians 3:17), but we are also in Him (John 17:21; Romans 8:1; 16:7; 1 Corinthians 1:30; etc.).

Thus what has been made known in terms of *the riches of the glory of the mystery* is explained in terms of the presence of Christ being *the hope of glory*. This is the future orientation that fulfills God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:5–6). Christ is the believer's hope for participation in the glory of Heaven.

We see the importance to Paul of the concept of "glory" when we read Romans 2:7, 10; 3:21; 8:17–18, 23, 30. The concepts of "hope" and "glory" are also connected in Romans 5:2 and Titus 2:13. Some students propose that the phrase "the riches of the glory" was standard in the worship settings of the first-century church, given similar expressions in Ephesians 1:18 and Philippians 4:19. In this context, the word *riches* refers to spiritual blessings (see Romans 2:4; 9:23; 11:33; Ephesians 1:7, 18; 2:7; 3:8, 16; Philippians 4:19).

D. With Goal-Directed Wisdom (v. 28)

28. Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.

The opening word of this verse tightly connects its content to "Christ" per His mention in the previous verse. Following that word *whom* comes a statement of two methods of conveying the message of the Christ: *preach[ing]* and *teaching*. Which of those two was more important to Paul? If word-count is any indication, it was *teaching*—a word he uses about twice as often as *preaching* or *proclaiming*.

The content of the message—whether preached or taught—has a singular goal of presenting everyone as *perfect in Christ Jesus*. But how is it possible to be perfect, even though

Jesus commanded it in Matthew 5:48 (compare 19:21; Ephesians 5:27)? The word in the original language translated “perfect” occurs 20 times in the New Testament. Depending on the context, it can mean “perfect,” “mature,” or “something that has reached its goal.” As we sift through the options, it’s important to remember that “explaining” which is correct runs the danger of “explaining away” alternatives that we don’t like. In the case at hand, it’s best to leave the word *perfect* just like that. Indeed, it’s not possible to attain perfection in this life (Romans 3:23). *But that doesn’t mean we lower the standard!* We keep aiming for perfection, and we ask forgiveness when we fall short.

Aiming for the target of perfection is aided by the application of *wisdom*. Paul explains the connection between wisdom, perfection, and mystery in 1 Corinthians 2:6–7. As one becomes devoted to pursuing godly wisdom, he or she is able to distinguish between true wisdom (Colossians 2:2–3) and its counterfeits (2:23).

What Do You Think?

What is the difference between preaching and teaching? What are the overlaps between them?

Digging Deeper

What is preaching able to accomplish that teaching cannot, and vice versa? Consider Acts 4:2 as you answer.

Adulthood—It’s for Everyone

Out of all my children, it seems my youngest is having the most trouble growing up. At 20 years old, he still won’t sit still long enough for me to teach him about basic life skills such as budgets, vehicle maintenance, credit cards, etc.

Because he refuses to be taught, he constantly makes bad choices and then comes to his father and me to bail him out. And we have the unfortunate job of telling him *no*. While that may seem harsh and unhelpful, his father and I both know what would happen if we caved: he would not grow out of this stage of unwise decisions.

We must not shy away from “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15). All truth and no love makes us hard, legalistic people. All love and no truth results in tolerance of sinful behavior. What can you do today to bring those into balance?

—P. M.

E. Through Divine Power (v. 29)

29. Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.

The church has God’s power or energy working within it. Paul’s successful evangelist endeavors are evidence of that fact (Ephesians 3:7, 20; Philippians 4:13). This power is not exclusive to the apostle Paul; it was working through others as well (Galatians 2:8; Philippians 2:13). The purpose of the church is for her members to be not only reconciled (justified) but also to be complete in holiness (sanctified). God’s working is directed toward both (compare 1 Corinthians 6:11).

III. Paul's Labor (Colossians 2:1–3)

A. Everywhere (v. 1)

1. For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh.

Paul desires that his readers know of his ministry of prayer on their behalf (see Colossians 1:9–12). The word translated *conflict* is a form of the same word translated “striving” in 1:29 (speaking of Paul’s own labor) and “ferently” in 4:12 (speaking of Epaphras’s laboring for them in prayer). Paul greets someone by name in Colossians 4:17, and he knows other Christians in Colosse (compare Philemon 1–2 with Colossians 4:10–17). Even so, the phrase *for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh* is widely accepted to mean that Paul had not been to Colosse (see Lesson Context).

Laodicea, approximately 10 miles from Colosse, is another city in the Lycus River valley. Although many within this letter’s audience are strangers to Paul, they are still objects of Paul’s concern that arises from the unity believers have in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 4:16).

B. Everyone (v. 2)

2a. That their hearts might be comforted.

Scripture often uses the word *heart* to designate the person, especially one’s center of moral and ethical deliberation, will, and attitudes (Genesis 6:5; Exodus 4:21; Matthew 9:4; 12:34; etc.). The verb translated *comforted* communicates more than offering solace; one is encouraged and strengthened in the kind of comfort Paul means (see also Ephesians 6:22; Colossians 4:8).

2b. Being knit together in love.

Knit together suggests a unity of purpose and thought. The same term appears in Ephesians 4:15–16 and Colossians 2:19 to speak of a unity derived from the church’s attachment to its head, Christ. The love that unites believers has its source in their devotion to Christ, who empowers us to love one another (Ephesians 3:19; 4:1–4; 1 John 4:11). Only a love built on the knowledge of what Christ has done and a desire to serve others can unite the church (John 13:34–35).

2c. And unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.

Paul desires his readers to have the confidence and power that comes from an ability to distinguish between true and false teaching (see Acts 9:22). The focus of this *understanding* is to be *the acknowledgement of the mystery of God*. Regarding Paul’s use of the word *mystery*, see above on Colossians 1:26–27 (compare 4:3).

What Do You Think?

What is your goal when contending for other believers?

Digging Deeper

How well does your goal align with Paul’s?

C. Everything (v. 3)

3. In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

This verse speaks against any false teachers who claim to have hidden truth to which only the spiritual elite have access. In contrast, Christ is the one *in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Isaiah 11:2). Wisdom and knowledge are not the same, although they are related. Knowledge is the mental grasp of truth; wisdom is the ability to use knowledge appropriately. Believers can access the wisdom and knowledge revealed in Christ, but that remains hidden from those who reject Him (Matthew 13:13–15, quoting Isaiah 6:9–10).

What Do You Think?

What role does the Bible's wisdom literature play in your seeking wisdom?

Digging Deeper

How can Old Testament texts aid in growing in maturity in Christ?

Conclusion

A. Then and Now

God's care for the first-century church came primarily through human hands. The apostle Paul is, of course, the primary example of this. But what Paul set in motion needed the help of others to carry it out on a long-term basis, to finish what he had started (Titus 1:5; etc.). We see some of those potential helpers in the names listed in passages such as Colossians 4:16 and in the unnamed persons of 1:2. What Paul wrote to them was a call to alertness and action. They needed to remain alert to wrong views of Christ, wisdom, power, glory, mystery, etc. Only with such alertness could they be prepared to act to protect the church.

So how well did the church at Colosse do in this regard? We don't really know, but the church in nearby Laodicea received criticism decades later for being lukewarm in Revelation 3:14–22. Lukewarmness manifests itself in the form of complacency.

Do you see signs of complacency in your church? How do we know when complacency is setting in—what are its signs? To be able to answer such questions is an issue of alertness, which must precede action. And who do you expect to take the corrective or preventative action? Perhaps you?

B. Prayer

Heavenly Father, remind us constantly of Your presence and available power! May we never exchange Your Son and His wisdom for counterfeits. Let us become experts in Christ to be able to stay alert to those pretenders! We pray in the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Access the mystery of Christ!