

## Glorious Riches

Lesson for June 2, 2024

### Unit I: Experiencing Hope

#### Adult Topic: Hope Amidst Suffering

**Scriptural Background:** Colossians 1:19-25

**Printed Text:** Colossians 1:24-29, 2:1-3

**Key verse:** “*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.*” Colossians 2:2-3, NIV)

A number of years ago researchers performed an experiment to see the effect hope has on those undergoing hardship. Two sets of laboratory rats were placed in separate tubs of water. The researchers left one set in the water and found that within an hour they had all drowned. The other rats were periodically lifted out of the water and then returned. When that happened, the second set of rats swam for over 24 hours. Why? Not because they were given a rest, but because they suddenly had hope!

Those animals somehow hoped that if they could stay afloat just a little longer, someone would reach down and rescue them. If hope holds such power for unthinking rodents, how much greater should its effect be on our lives.

*Today in the Word, May, 1990*

### Key Terms

1. **Glory** (verse 1:27) – Praise, honor, or distinction extended by common consent; worshipful praise, honor, and thanksgiving.
2. **Minister** (verse 1:25) – One who performs any service; an administrator; “servant”, NIV.
3. **Mystery** (verse 1:26) – Something not understood or beyond understanding; the secret or specialized practices or ritual peculiar to an occupation or a body of people.
4. **Preach** (verse 1:28) – To make known; declare. To urge acceptance or abandonment of an idea or course of action; *specifically*, to exhort in an officious or tiresome manner.
5. **Suffering** (verse 1:24) – An enduring affliction. The state or experience of one that suffers.
6. **Tribulations** (verse 1:24) – distress or suffering resulting from oppression or persecution. A trying experience
7. **Understanding** (verse 2:2) – The power of comprehending; the capacity to apprehend general relations of particulars.

## Lesson Background

Colossians is one of four prison epistles written by the apostle Paul during his first Roman imprisonment. When Paul wrote the epistle to the church at Colosse, Christianity was new and seemed too good and too simple to be true. They were in a very difficult, Greek, pagan culture and were having birthing and growing pains. They were being negatively influenced and thus confused by the spectacle of cults and false religions that surrounded them; they needed the True Savior. A church planter named Epaphras helped these Colossians embrace the new life and Way, so they were evangelized at the time of Paul's ministry to the Ephesians. They received the grace of Christ but found themselves in further turmoil. False teachings, mysticism, empty philosophies, legalism, and traditions had battered its walls, threatening the health and wellbeing of the members and their evangelistic opportunities. They were under siege by false teachers and prideful men seeking sensationalism and mysticism rather than Christ as Lord. Christ's Deity was being challenged and rejected for more so called "clever and newer" ideas (Acts 19).

Christianity was the solution, but it is so simple, most people missed the power of the Gospel message and therefore sought to add to it. And, the new fancy philosophical theories were as catchy and powerful then as today's false teachers and their deceptive ministries that fleece the flock and leave people empty and devastated along with a bad reputation in the wake. Thus, the Colossian church was in chaos.

Chapter 1 includes a greeting (Colossians 1:1–2) followed by gratitude for the faith of the Colossian Christians (Colossians 1:3–8). Paul then includes a prayer intended to encourage the growth and maturity of believers in this city (Colossians 1:9–14). He then transitions to a focus on Christ's greatness, including His character (Colossians 1:15–23). It is at this point that this week's lesson begins.

## Lesson in Depth

### I. **Suffering for Hope's Sake** (Colossians 1:24-27)

**I now rejoice in my sufferings for you:** Paul wrote this from a Roman jail. He was able to see that his **sufferings** worked something good for others, so he could say that his **sufferings** were **for** the Colossians and other Christians.

**And fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ:** This word **afflictions** is never used for the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Most commentators see this as a reference to the affliction Jesus endured in ministry. *These afflictions* are not yet complete, and in this sense Jesus still "suffers" as He ministers through His people.

"Paul attaches no atoning value whatever to his own sufferings for the church."  
(Robertson)

“The term ‘afflictions of Christ’ is never associated with the redemptive suffering of Jesus upon the cross. It speaks, rather, of those ministerial sufferings which Paul bears because he represents Jesus Christ.” (Lane)

**For the sake of His body, which is the church:** Paul did not suffer for *himself* in the way that an ascetic might. Instead, he suffered for the sake of the body of Christ.

Ascetics focus on *their* holiness, on *their* spiritual growth, and on *their* perfection. Paul followed in the footsteps of Jesus and was an others-centered person. Paul found holiness, spiritual growth, and maturity when he pursued these things for others.

**Of which I became a minister:** Paul was a **minister** – that is, a *servant* of the body of Christ, the church. He did not take this position on his own initiative, but **according to the stewardship from God**. God put Paul into this position, he did not put himself.

**The word of God, the mystery which has been hidden:** In the Biblical sense, a **mystery** is not a riddle. It is a truth that can only be known by revelation and not by intuition. *Now* it can be known, because it now has been revealed to His saints.

**Hidden from ages and generations:** This reminds us that there are aspects to God’s plan that *were not* clearly revealed in the Old Testament. The specific mystery Paul refers to here deals with many aspects of the work of Jesus in His people, but especially the plan of the church, to make one body out of Jew and Gentile, taken from the “trunk” of Israel, yet not Israel.

“The mystery is this: that God had designed to grant the Gentiles the same privileges with the Jews and make them his people who were not his people. That this is what Paul means by the *mystery*, see Ephesians 3:3, etc.” (Clarke)

**This mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you:** The wonder and glory of the abiding, indwelling Jesus was not clearly revealed in the Old Testament, especially that He would abide in **the Gentiles**. Therefore, this aspect of the work of Jesus in His people was a **mystery** that wasn’t revealed until the time of Jesus and the apostles.

“This is the crowning wonder to Paul that God had included the Gentiles in his redemptive grace.” (Robertson)

This means that God is revealed to us in Jesus. Classic theologians use the Latin term *deus absconditus* to refer to the “hidden God,” the God that cannot be clearly seen or known. The Latin theological term *deus revelatus* refers to the “revealed God.” In Jesus, the *deus absconditus* has become the *deus revelatus*.

**Christ in you, the hope of glory:** This is the Christian’s hope of glory. It isn’t our own hard work or devotion to God, or the power of our own spirituality. Instead, it is the abiding presence of Jesus: *Christ in you*.

## II. **Suffering for Inclusiveness** (Colossians 1:28-29, 2:1-3)

**Him we preach:** This was the focus of Paul's preaching. He didn't preach himself, or his opinions, or even lots and lots of entertaining stories. He preached *Jesus*.

b. **Warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom:** Paul wanted the whole gospel for the whole world. He wouldn't hold back in either area – it was for **every man**, and he presented it in **all wisdom**.

Some translate the word **warning** as “counseling.” The ancient Greek verb *nouthetountes* means, “To impart understanding,” “to lay on the mind or the heart.” The stress is on influencing not only the intellect, but also the will and disposition. It describes a basic means of education.

The work of **warning** – or helping to impart understanding – was a passion for Paul in ministry (Acts 20:31). It is also the job of church leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:12) and of the church body in general (Colossians 3:16), providing that they are *able* to admonish others (Romans 15:14).

**That we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus:** The goal of Paul's ministry was to bring people to maturity in Christ, and not to dependence upon himself.

“Therefore, the aim of this epistle, and, indeed, of all apostolic work is admonishing and teaching every man toward the realization of perfection in Christ, because that issues in the perfecting of the whole Church.” (Morgan)

This work was for **every man**. In contrast, the false teachers at Colosse “believed the way of salvation to be so involved that it could be understood only by a select few who made up sort of a spiritual aristocracy.” (Vaughan)

**Striving according to His working which works in me mightily:** Paul's work was empowered by God's mighty strength. But God's strength in Paul's life didn't mean that he did nothing. He worked hard **according to His working**.

“The word ‘struggling’ (**striving**), whose root can mean ‘to compete in the games’, carries, as of then in Paul, the idea of athletic contest: Paul does not go about his work half-heartedly, hoping vaguely that grace will fill in the gaps which he is too lazy to work at himself.” (Wright)

We begin Chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Colossians, but this does not begin a different topic in Paul's letter; it is clearly a continuation attacking the false influences which beset that church and churches in the surrounding area, and false teachings which still plague the Church today.

Paul was experiencing a great spiritual struggle concerning spiritual attacks on the Church, even though he never met most of those believers to whom he is writing. There was much cultural pressure being exerted upon the churches in that area, even as there is throughout the world today. As is the case with most cults and sects, false religions

and worldly philosophies, they taught that there were “hidden secrets”, “mysteries” and practices concerning a relationship with God. False religions contain worthless mysteries and secrets not found in Christ or supported in His Word.

**What a great conflict I have for you:** This **great conflict** was *inside Paul (I have for you)*. It wasn't that Paul fought with others about the Colossian Christians. Paul described his spiritual warfare and heartfelt care for the Colossians as a great conflict.

Paul used athletic imagery in Colossians 1:29 (*striving*), and he continues that sports metaphor with the words **great conflict**.

**For as many as have not seen my face in the flesh:** Apparently, Paul had never visited Colosse himself. Most of the Colossian Christians had never seen his face in the flesh. Even as Paul's authority extended to those he had never met – to those who had never seen his face – so it also extends to us.

**That their hearts may be encouraged:** Paul wanted this because he was concerned about their *enthusiasm*. He knew that discouraged, downcast Christians are easy prey for the world, the flesh, and the devil.

**Encouraged:** “The word he uses is *paraklein*. Sometimes that word means to *comfort*, sometimes to *exhort*, but always at the back of it there is the idea of enabling a person to meet some difficult situation with confidence and gallantry.” (Barclay) Paul wanted these Christians to be fit for heroic action.

**Being knit together in love:** Paul wanted this because he was concerned about their *unity*. The unity wouldn't come from coercion, but **love**.

**Attaining to all riches of the full assurance of the understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery:** Paul wanted this because he was concerned about their *understanding*. He knew that their unity and steadfastness was not just a matter of **love**, but also of growing together in God's truth.

Paul knew that their unity came from not *only* love, but also from the truth, from both being **knit together in love** *and* growing in the **understanding** and **knowledge** of God's truth.

The true wisdom Paul wanted them to know in Jesus would bring them together – indeed, **knit them together in love** – instead of dividing them the way that false wisdom did.

For Paul, real **riches** were found in the believer's **full assurance**. Many lack **full assurance** about the character of God and are unconvinced that *He is really good and loving*. Others lack full assurance of their salvation and wonder if their *Christian life is for real*. Great freedom and confidence comes when we come to this full assurance.

**To the knowledge of the mystery of God:** The term **mystery of God** is used in a few different ways in the New Testament. Here, Paul uses the term regarding the character and person of God – something we could not know unless it was revealed by Him.

“The word ‘Christ’ is in the same case as ‘mystery,’ placing it in apposition with it. The mystery is Christ.” (Wuest)

“Others might lead them astray with specious talk of mysteries; but there was one mystery above all others – the mystery of God’s loving purpose, disclosed in Christ alone – and Paul’s concern was that they should come to know this all-surpassing mystery, and know it as an indwelling presence.” (Bruce)

Three mysteries are described in Colossians 1:24-2:3:

- The Church as the Body of Christ, for which Paul suffered and served (Colossians 1:24-26).
- The Indwelling Christ, the hope of glory in each individual believer (Colossians 1:27).
- The Revealed Jesus, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:2-3).

**Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge:** This is an important idea in Paul’s letter to the Colossians. With this, Paul refuted some of the bad teaching troubling the Colossian Christians. They were influenced by teachers who told them to seek the **treasures of wisdom and knowledge**, but *not* to seek them in Jesus. Paul wrote, “You will only find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Jesus. He has them all.” It’s not wrong to seek after wisdom and knowledge; but we must seek it all in Jesus.

When Paul said this wisdom is **hidden** in Christ, he used the ancient Greek word *apokruphos*. “His very use of that word is a blow aimed at the Gnostics... Gnostics believed that a great mass of elaborate knowledge was necessary for salvation. That knowledge they set down in their books which they called *apokruphos* because they were barred to the ordinary man.” (Barclay) Paul wanted all to know that real **wisdom** was not hidden in secret books, but deposited in Jesus Christ so that all can access it.

“‘Hidden’ does not, however, mean that they are concealed but rather that they are laid up or stored away as a treasure.” (Vaughn)

“Everything we might want to ask about God and his purposes can and must now be answered – this is the force of the verse – with reference to the crucified and risen Jesus, the Messiah.” (Wright)

“He is indeed the Mystery of God, profound in the wonder of His being, and yet so real that the tiniest child talks of Him with sweet familiarity.” (Morgan)

When Paul describes the truth of God with words like **riches** and **treasures**, he reminds us that God’s truth is precious and worthy of sacrificial seeking.

## Lesson Summary

In this week's lesson the Apostle Paul discusses his ministry, suffering for the sake of the church, and the mystery of Christ revealed to the Gentiles. Here are some lessons that can be drawn from this passage:

### Colossians 1:24-29 - Paul's Ministry and Suffering

1. **Rejoicing in Suffering:** Paul expresses joy in his sufferings for the sake of the church, highlighting the idea that suffering can have a purpose in God's plan. This teaches believers to find joy and purpose in their trials, knowing they contribute to a greater good.
  - *Verse 24: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."*
2. **Christ in You, the Hope of Glory:** Paul emphasizes the mystery revealed to the saints, which is "Christ in you, the hope of glory." This underscores the profound truth that Christ dwells within believers, offering hope and glory.
  - *Verse 27: "To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."*
3. **Purpose of Ministry:** Paul's ministry aims to present everyone mature in Christ. This involves teaching, warning, and laboring with all the energy that God powerfully works within him. It highlights the responsibility of Christian leaders to help believers grow in maturity and faith.
  - *Verses 28-29: "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."*

### Colossians 2:1-3 - Paul's Concern for Believers

1. **Encouragement and Unity:** Paul expresses his concern for the believers' hearts to be encouraged and knit together in love. This emphasizes the importance of mutual support, love, and unity within the Christian community.
  - *Verse 2: "That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ."*
2. **Full Assurance and Knowledge:** Paul desires that believers attain the full assurance of understanding and knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ. This teaches the value of deepening one's understanding of the faith and the centrality of Christ in all knowledge and wisdom.
  - *Verse 2: "To reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ."*
3. **Treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge:** In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. This affirms that true wisdom and knowledge are found in a relationship with Christ, encouraging believers to seek Him in their pursuit of understanding.
  - *Verse 3: "In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."*

## **Key Takeaways**

- **Joy in Suffering:** Embrace trials as part of God's plan and find joy in contributing to the growth of the church.
- **Christ in You:** Recognize the profound truth of Christ's indwelling presence as the hope of glory.
- **Ministry Purpose:** Understand the goal of ministry is to help believers grow in maturity and faith.
- **Encouragement and Unity:** Foster a supportive, loving, and united Christian community.
- **Pursuit of Knowledge:** Seek a deeper understanding of Christ, in whom true wisdom and knowledge are found.

These lessons can inspire and guide believers in their faith journey, ministry efforts, and community life.