

THE GREAT MYSTERY

by Ray C. Stedman

You have all seen the television commercial for the Armed Forces that says---to a musical accompaniment---"Be all that you can be." It implies that if you join the Army, the Navy, the Air Force or the Marines, then you can be all that you can be. I don't believe that! Does anybody? But a word like that has strong appeal. Everybody wants to be all that he can be. I have never met anyone who doesn't want to be all that he feels himself capable of being. We all hunger for that. No matter how degraded, downcast or frustrated, everyone longs for fulfillment. And yet, as we observe the bewildering tragedy of human life, we are left shaking our heads at the seeming impossibility of that. I have been listening to stories all week from relatives, friends, and on the media, describing endless shame, hurt, pain, murder, divorce, cruelty, abuse and personal failure. Is there any real possibility of reversing this in someone's life? Can the downward slide be arrested?

The good news of the gospel answers with a resounding Yes! It can be done! In fact, that is what the apostle Paul is saying here in his letter to the Colossians. This is what I would call a first century description of how a life can be changed:

"Once you alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation--- if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." (Colossians 1:21-23)

What a marvelous thing to find hope like that in this dark world of ours! And how wonderful that God himself undertakes to make this change! I read this morning a statement from a man who felt he heard God saying to him one day, "I wish you would leave all this reconciling of things to me, since you are so hopelessly unequipped for it, and that you would use whatever influence you have with your fellow fussers and worriers to do likewise. I know what I am doing and I will go over it with you when you get home."

That is a good word for us to remember. God is at work. He is sovereign. And he can and does reconcile people to himself and make a change in their lives. This passage, from verse 21 on through the end of the chapter, is a tremendous description of the process of change in a human being. It traces it in three stages, and I propose that we consider them this morning.

First, there is a beginning that involves an inner reversal of attitude. A total change of outlook occurs when you come into contact personally with the Savior himself. As Paul states here, there was a time when all of us who are now Christians were "alienated from God." We did not have any use for God. We did not take him into our reckoning. We did not consider him important. We started and ended each day without a thought of him. We went about our own plans, lived for ourselves, and did what we felt like doing, never giving a thought to God. Or if we did think of him, we regarded him as merely a remote Being on the horizon of life, but we never expected anything from him. Because we cut him out of our thinking---even though he was sustaining our very life---we ended up, as Paul describes, "enemies in our minds," hostile toward God. We did not want anything to do with him. You remember how that felt, don't you? We avoided God. We thought he would interfere with our plans; that he was a cosmic killjoy out to make us live uneventful and unhappy lives. We were not open to him in any degree whatsoever. We were enemies of God, and as a result we expressed that enmity in evil behavior.

That is really what this text says. The translation, "because of your evil behavior," is a very poor one. That sounds as though evil behavior is the cause of inner alienation and hostility toward God. But it is quite the other way around. It is inner alienation, estrangement from God and hostility toward him, that causes evil behavior. That is what the Greek text clearly declares here.

"But now," Paul says, "we are reconciled to God." Something has happened within us. It occurred when we saw that the death of Jesus was for us, that somehow he had done something to set aside our estrangement, our brokenness and hurt, and that if we came to him in faith he would deliver us. So we came. Something happened then to our inner attitude. We were changed in the way we thought. We no longer saw God as an enemy and a Judge, but as a loving Father. We recognized that the cross was not a symbol of failure in the life of a religious fanatic, but it was a moment when the great enemies all men face were conquered; when death was overcome and all the evil powers against mankind were set at naught. Thus our whole life was changed.

Just this past week I received a letter from a man describing the change that occurred in his life. Here is an excerpt from it:

I visited your office about four and one-half years ago at the request of my wife. When I met with you I was away from my wife and planning to divorce. After meeting with you I listened to many of your tapes and read several of your books and through this and other Christian materials I developed at least a vague sense of the personal nature of God and that he does, in fact, hate divorce. Out of a guilty conscience I moved back into my home, with my wife. I truly did not believe I could ever love my wife again and that my life would be forever miserable, but the guilt of leaving was so great I had to stay.

After I had been home for about six months, during which time my wife encouraged me to attend church and Bible study, the Lord saved me and demonstrated his love for me. In a moment of surrender he freed me from drugs and alcohol. I had been drinking a quart of whiskey per day for years, and my health clearly revealed it. Since that time my love relationship with Jesus has continually grown. As the world views it, my life has totally fallen apart. I have lost my business and everything our family has ever owned in the last three years. The world does not know what I and my family know. Our riches are no longer in things (the created). Our riches are in the Creator. He is our Rock. He is faithful and he will deliver us and we only desire that our will be in conformity to his will.

He has given us a wonderful peace of heart, joy in our spirits and the strength to bear up under whatever circumstances he allows to mold us into conformity to his character. I have found in my wife everything I had ever hoped to have in a wife, and the Holy Spirit has encouraged me for some time now to share with you this wonderful miracle worked by God through you his servant and others like you.

That clear testimony confirms what the apostle says to the Colossians. God is in the business of changing lives. That is what this good news is about. If you need your life changed, that is where you start.

The process of change begins, as we have seen, with opening the heart to Christ, and receiving him as Lord. But it is a process that is headed for a specific goal, which, according to the apostle, is "to present you holy [whole, complete, well balanced in spirit, soul and body] in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation." That is God's goal, and he fully intends to accomplish it. The sign that it is happening---don't miss this---is, "if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel." It is continuing that is the proof of reality. Many people start out the Christian life, filled with joy because they have found a new sensation. But it does not last. Somewhere along the line it fades. Finally, they set it all aside and go back to the way they once were. That is a sign there was never real faith at the beginning. It is continuance that proves reality. Someone has well said, "If your faith fizzles before you finish, it is because it was faulty from the first!" You get an "F" for that performance! That does not mean that faith cannot waver and wobble at times. It does with all of us. Sometimes faith grows dim, but true faith never ceases. We never give up the realization that God has changed us. There is a new attitude, a new life imparted, and that is the sign that we cannot give up being a Christian. I received a phone call from a young man one day who said, "I'm going to quit being a Christian. It's too hard. I don't want to pay the price." I said to him, "I think that is what you ought to do." There was a long silence for a moment, then he said, "You know I can't do that." I knew he could not, and he did not, for it is continuing that is the proof of reality.

The second step is the realization of the part others play in this process of change. Listen to these words:

"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. Now I rejoice in what was suffered 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..."

One of the remarkable things that Christians learn is that others have had a part in bringing the gospel to them. Oftentimes that part was played long before we ever came to Christ, but when we learn of it we are greatly moved. I will never forget the Methodist evangelist who preached to me when I was a boy ten years old. I remember to this day the text he preached from because when I heard the gospel from him I came to Christ. I do not know where that man is or what has happened to him, but his name and the memory of that occasion are still fresh in my mind.

Some may wonder what is meant by the statement, "the gospel...that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven." How could that be, we ask? When Paul wrote this he had preached in a few cities of the Roman Empire, which was but a small part of the planet on which we live. Then, they did not even know about North and South America. How could this statement be true? We find the answer in chapter 10 of Paul's letter to the Romans. There he argues that there must be preachers who must be sent, etc., in order for people to hear. Nevertheless, he asks, "Have they not heard?" Then he quotes from Psalm 19, "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." The psalm states, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork." Nature is the first preacher of the gospel. There is order in the universe. There is clearly intelligence behind it all. Hebrews says, "He that comes to God must believe that he is [that is what nature tells us] and that he is a rewarder of those that diligently seek him." If anyone, anywhere, responds to the facts that nature presents about the existence of a God of power and glory, and begins to seek him, then God himself assumes the responsibility to bring him to hear of the Redeemer, the Savior. It is still true that "there is no other name, under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved." God will bring the seeking soul to Jesus.

The second thing Paul states is that the character of those who truly preach the gospel is that they are servants. They count it a delight and joy to be used of God. This is a major distinguishing mark by which you can tell whether a preacher is true or false. If you listen to the television evangelists today, as I frequently have done, you can hardly escape the feeling that Christianity is a matter of trying to get something from God--to get God to work for us. We humans are the ultimate reason for all that happens in life. But the truth is, we Christians are given the high privilege of serving the Living God, of God using us in our weakness, failure, folly and faultiness to proclaim this truth to others. The realization that the God of Glory is willing to do that should create in us a deep sense of gratitude that we can be his servants. That is the difference between the false and true witnesses. The false think God works for them; the true delight in the fact that God is using them, and they they do not regard it as an intrusion or a burden, but the highest honor that could ever be given.

But, says Paul, such service involves much pain and sacrifice: "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 does he mean, that something is lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Clearly, he does not mean that something was lacking in the atoning work of Jesus; that the suffering of the cross was not sufficient to settle the question of sin. The fact is, the word "afflictions" is never used in the scriptures to describe the death of Jesus. Afflictions are what Jesus went through before the cross from the opposition of the enemy, the devil, and from our Lord's willingness to make himself a servant to others and to minister to human needs. That was when he endured "afflictions."

But there is nothing lacking in what he did on the cross. Scripture says, "He is able to save to the uttermost all those who come unto God through him." John adds, "He is the propitiation for our sin, and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world." There is nothing lacking there!

But when we are engaged in fighting against the opposition of the devil and his angels, when we are opposed by the lusts of the flesh and face the subtle lies and deceptions of the world around us, then we find we are

engaged in a combat, and combat is always costly! Someone must pay a price in order that others might come to Christ.

Have you ever asked yourself, how many prayers and tears, how much heartache and disappointment has someone gone through for you in order that you might come to Christ? I never read the Scriptures without a momentary thought, at least, of what it cost others for me to have this Bible in my hand: the blood of martyrs, the fears and tears of persecuted people throughout centuries, the sweat and labor of translators, and the effort of teachers to make it plain and clear. We should never read the Scriptures without remembering that someone has died to make it possible.

When we come to Christ we are to take up this battle and suffer on behalf of others. It not only benefits others but it benefits us as well. That is why Paul says, "I rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf." "It does something for me," he says. "It keeps me usable. I am reminded constantly that it is out of weakness that I am made strong." That is what suffering for others will do for us: it will keep us humble and useful. But it also has great effect upon others: it shows them that we are deeply concerned. We pray for them, we long for them, we grieve over them, we hurt when they hurt. That is the process by which others come to Christ.

Finally, this process requires, as Paul goes on to say, an understanding of a truly great mystery:

"...the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. 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 [not simply Christ, but "Christ in you"] counseling and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ [that is the goal which in v. 22 he says God is aiming at]. To this end I labor, struggling with all the energy he so powerfully works in me."

There is the great mystery. It is the greatest truth taught in the Bible, and yet it is the most seriously missing element in many churches today. Most Christians in our churches understand that Christ died for the forgiveness of their sins---they believed that and came to Christ because of that---but that is where most of them stop. Relatively few, it seems, ever go on to grasp the fact that Jesus died for them that he might live in them. It is his life in them that is the source of power, change and deliverance, and the ability to resist temptation. That is how loneliness is met and Companionship provided. It is not enough to know that Christ died in order that we might go to heaven. We are also to know, understand, and practice Christ actually living in us now!

That is surely the most astounding truth in the Bible. As Paul declares here, it is a mystery that "has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to his saints." Think of that! Nowhere in the Old Testament will you ever find a single verse that describes the process by which God is going to help his people. There are great promises in the Old Testament, such as Isaiah's word at the end of chapter 40, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." That is true. Old Testament saints understood and believed that promise, and they actually experienced it: they waited on the Lord, and they were strengthened; they were lifted up, comforted and helped. All that is clear as you read the Old Testament. But what was never told them was the means by which God would do this.

It was not until Jesus came and taught his disciples that we learn at last what means God would employ. In Matthew 13, that amazing chapter of the parables of Jesus, our Lord took these words on his own lips, quoting one of the Old Testament prophets, "I will open my mouth in parables. I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." Gradually he sought to impart to the disciples this amazing truth: through his death and resurrection, and through the coming of the Holy Spirit, they would be indwelt by Jesus himself. In the Upper Room, just before the cross, he uttered these words, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home in him." Dr. Robert Munger's great little booklet, "My Heart, Christ's Home," is a magnificent development of this statement. It is the mystery hidden from the foundation of the world, but now made known to his saints.

Paul himself lived this way. That is what he is telling us in the last verse of this chapter: "To this end I labor,

striving with all the energy he [Jesus] so powerfully works in me." There is a new power at work. When you understand that you possess the Lord Jesus---that he is in you---you have a totally new source of power. You also have a new desire, a new motive: you long to see change take place and you are motivated to take the steps that will bring it into being---to obey, to read, to study, to learn, to grow. You have a new Companion along the way. The problem of loneliness is ended because you are never alone when Jesus is present in your life. What a mighty truth this is! It is what delivers people. It is more than the fact that Jesus died on a cross. He died that he might live in us! This is the highest truth of all, a truth that God labors for us to understand and apply. When it happens, things begin to change in any human life.

Our long-time friend, Major Ian Thomas, used to put it very succinctly. He is a former British Army officer, and has made it his lifelong ministry to travel all over the world and teach this wonderful truth of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." He puts it this way:

He had to be what he was, in order to do what he did!

We have been seeing that in Colossians. Jesus had to be both God and man in order to die in our place, be raised again, ascend into the heavens, and send the Holy Spirit, and thus come into our life. Second,

He had to do what he did, in order that we might have what he is.

We could never have this new power, this new source of energy, this new comfort and strength in our life, if Jesus had not done what he did. It is on the basis of his death and resurrection that we have what he is. Third,

we must have what he is, in order to be what he was.

That is what this great text is saying. God wants to present us "holy, without blemish, and free from accusation," just as his Son was. We are being conformed to the image of his Son. He is "bringing many sons to glory." We must have what he is in order to be what he was. That is why it is important to understand this great mystery, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

The world knows nothing of this mystery. You will never find it mentioned by the media, except by Christians. You will never learn about it in the great universities of the world. In all secular wisdom and knowledge there is no recognition of this incomparable source of change in a human life. It is found only in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is why this message is such a powerful, world transforming, revolutionary statement, and why we ought to give ourselves to understanding it more than any other thing in life.

Let me summarize this passage, in closing. The apostle points out three stages of change. First, the new birth begins a process which is intended to perfect us, spirit, soul and body. To advance that process requires pain and commitment on the part of others on our behalf; and when we come to Christ we are to undertake that same pain and commitment on behalf of others. Finally, all progress occurs only by coming to understand and to practice the mystery of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is how to stop the terrible downward slide of any human life!

There may be some who have come to this service and have never yet begun that process. If so, I want you to know that this transaction can take place between you and God alone right here. In a moment of quietness, as we close this service, you can say, "Lord Jesus, here I am. Come into my heart. Receive me. Begin to change me." He will respond, as he promises to do, to those who in true faith invite him into their lives.

Prayer

"Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

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