

# THE GREAT SECRET

by Steve Zeisler

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Most of the enduring stories and great myths of virtually every culture have to do with someone's undertaking a quest, or accepting a challenge. We might think back to the culture of the ancient Greeks and the odyssey of Odysseus or the labors of Hercules; or to the Middle Ages and the quest of King Arthur and the knights of the round table for the Holy Grail. A modern example of the same might be the movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In each case the hero sets off on an extraordinary challenge, questing for something that is of great value, suffering and being deprived, but extending himself because the challenge is so worthy of the effort.

One of the greatest stories of a quest or challenge that I know of is found not in mythology but in the Bible. The apostle Paul, who began his life as Saul of Tarsus, represents a life in which a call was extended, or a quest laid before him, which he took up and lived out. Today in Colossians we're going to look at his mature reflection on the challenge that the Lord Jesus offered to him and what it meant to live a life filled by Jesus Christ. But before we get to that I want to go back to his beginning.

## SAUL'S CONVERSION

The way Saul of Tarsus became Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, began with his hating Christ and his cause. Saul was a defender of Judaism against the incursion of Christianity. In Acts 7 and 8 we find him enabling the martyrdom of Stephen. Eventually he was sent to Damascus with letters by the leadership of the Jews in Jerusalem to imprison and oversee the destruction of Jews who had become Christians. Acts 9:3 records what happened to him on the way to Damascus::

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

The story continues on with how Saul was blinded by this light that interrupted his journey and was led trembling into Damascus, where a Christian named Ananias met him. Ananias had been hesitant to be kind to Saul because he had been so thoroughly antagonistic to the faith, but the Lord convinced him with these words:

"Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

The Lord was saying, "I have set this man on a quest that will take up the rest of his life. He has received my call to carry my name. He is going to live a life of high adventure and storied difficulty, and I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Now we'll look at Paul's reflection on what it was like to live that way, written to the Colossians many years later. A couple of themes from Christ's call to him reappear in this section of Colossians. One is Jesus' receiving the persecution of his children as persecution of himself. Saul had been persecuting Christians, imprisoning them and overseeing their beating and execution. But Jesus said, "It's me that you're persecuting!" Another theme is that in suffering for Jesus' name Paul was entering into intimacy with Christ. Let's begin reading in Colossians 1 with the last phrase of verse 23 through verse 29:

...the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions. Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

## **DUAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

Paul says at the end of verse 23 that he has been made a minister of the gospel and in verse 25 that he has been made a minister of the church. The word minister here is not at all a term for an exalted position, but one for an ordinary servant who has responsibility to his superiors, who must give up his life and his rights to that which is greater than he is.

We sometimes hear terms today such as prime minister or minister of state that suggest that ministers are more important than other people. Of course, in the New Testament it is just the opposite. A servant or a minister is the subordinate one whose rights are less important than those superior to him. At times I cringe at those in spiritual leadership who are clearly using the people of God or the words of God to make money, gain stature, puff themselves up, and live better than those around them. They are using up the great commissions that God has given to benefit themselves. But Paul's understanding of the quest the Lord had put him on was that he was given the opportunity and the joy of serving both the gospel and the church.

Paul knew that he was to be a steward or overseer of an extraordinary, rich, and glorious mystery that he was to make plain. By analogy we might well think of relief efforts in Somalia, or other places where people are in desperate shape, to bring in food and supplies to save lives that cannot be saved any other way. Drought conditions have made farming impossible in Somalia, and these people cannot save themselves. Those who are bringing relief to them have life itself in their hands, and they must guard it because there are enemies who will attack and destroy it. They have to take seriously the life that they bring, and they must care desperately and deeply for the people to whom they are bringing the food. Paul is thinking of the quest that he's been given in that way. He has life itself in his hands, and there are people who need to know it. It's a very high, difficult calling, and it's worth giving his life to.

## **Paul's Quest**

There is language throughout the section we just read and the paragraph that follows that would fit well in any adventure story. It is the language of the quest, the challenge; it's filled with references to riches, glory, mystery, wealth, and treasure. And yet Paul describes what it meant for him to deal in such things. Verse 24 reminds us that in the challenge he has been given, he rejoices in suffering. And at the end of the paragraph he speaks of labors in which he struggles mightily. Because he was a minister of the gospel and a minister of the church, he was called on to suffer and to rejoice in his sufferings. He was called on to labor, to do the hard work of caring for people, spending himself physically and emotionally, shouldering the burdens and pains of other people. This was the quest the Lord gave him when he interrupted the journey to Damascus. Remember the word to Ananias: "I will show him how much he must suffer."

In verse 24 there are some modifications to the statement, "I rejoice in my sufferings." He doesn't rejoice in his sufferings because he likes being beaten. There's no delight in being hurt. He rejoices in his suffering because it's purposeful; "It is for your sake," he says in verse 24.

Remember that Paul was under house arrest in Rome, awaiting he knew not what at the hands of Caesar. For more than two years he had been set aside from any freedom to move or minister at all. Before that he had been the target of a band of terrorists who had wanted to destroy his life in Jerusalem, and had escaped only by the

skin of his teeth. He had been shipwrecked on his way to Rome, as a prisoner. Prior to all of that he had been imprisoned in other places. He had been beaten and left for dead. He had been misunderstood by his own people, and rejected by those he cared for. Time and again he had suffered deprivation, hatred, loss, physical harm, emotional pain, and the pressure of caring for others. But he says, "Even if this life doesn't pay off for me, and if my lot as a servant of the gospel and of the church is to give away what I have and to lay down my life for others, I rejoice because other people in other places are going to grow in their faith by the letters I write, the words I teach, the encouragement I give, and my example of faith. Other people are going to have life, and that's enough for me."

## **INTIMACY WITH CHRIST**

The other wonderful truth that Paul elucidates in speaking of his sufferings is that it draws him near to the Lord. "...and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions." Now there is nothing lacking in Christ's afflictions in the sense that Jesus did not entirely pay for our sins on the cross. That is not at all what's in view here. The suffering of Christ in dying on the cross, defeating sin and death was absolutely complete. It cannot be added to, and there is no need for further efforts of people to suffer so that we get more saved or anything like that.

What Paul is referring to is the hatred by Jesus' enemies that Jesus endured all his life and the hatred of the prophets and patriarchs before him. The hatred of those who live a life of faith in every generation is ultimately hatred of the Lord Jesus. He was misunderstood, denigrated, beaten, ridiculed, cut off, and executed as a criminal in his own lifetime. The world, which is still committed to its sinfulness, still hates him. And it will take out its hatred of him on those who have his life within them. Paul is saying, "I rejoice in my suffering because I am doing my part in living out the suffering that Jesus still experiences in the world." Remember what the Lord said to Paul on the Damascus road: "Why are you persecuting me?" We can imagine that for every tear that falls from our eyes and pain we experience, especially that caused by persecution for our faith, tears are in the eyes of our Lord. It still hurts him to have his people hurt. He still receives the blows. He is still sorrowing over those who hate him and over those who love him when they are hurt for his name's sake.

Paul says, "I do my part in filling up what remains of the afflictions of the Lord, and so I rejoice. I'm not going to fight back against the assignment I've been given. I'm going to take the hardship of the quest." The quest, the challenge by definition must have difficulty in it. To go wherever he sends us, to labor at great length because we choose to, to suffer with joy because there is no avoiding it, is the language of the challenge. It would be true in any story. Even Indiana Jones, a made-up story, is filled with danger, deprivation, and difficulty.

Earlier this morning Doug Goins told us about the six weeks he and his family just spent in the Philippines at a center where Wycliffe missionaries come during the summer to do their translation work. He came back with a number of stories that were absolutely heartrending to me about what these missionaries have had to go through. They go to the most remote and out-of-the-way places and stay for decades, often desperately lonely, caring for people who don't listen in many cases, their physical health deteriorating, serving the Lord year after year. Many missionaries, especially those who go into tropical areas, get diseases they will never be cured of. They learn to live with the diseases and spend a high percentage of their lives being sick. They get up and work until they get too sick, and then they lie down until they're strong enough to work some more.

These missionaries leave behind their home culture, undergo the deterioration of their physical health, and then with all the changes that take place in their absence, finally come back to a world that is totally unfamiliar to them, where they feel like a misfit. Doug's description of his immensely heightened respect for these missionaries echoes in my heart as well. But it's worth it, they say, because someone else will benefit. And the Lord understands the difficulty that they undertake and enters into it with them. These are the choices made by a servant (minister) of the church.

## **Servant of the Gospel**

Listen carefully to what the apostle Paul says now in verses 26-27 about what it means to be a servant of the gospel, how excited he is about the message that he has, and how extraordinary he understands it to be to have

this message, this life, to give away to others: "...I [must] fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." That's the language of the quest, isn't it? It's a mystery, it's hidden, it's been revealed, and he has it to give away. It is the richest of truth, the most glorious of notions. So he wants to offer them the extraordinary thing that God has made known to him.

There are several arresting things here. The word mystery in the New Testament does not refer to something you can figure out by finding clues. And Paul says, "I've been let in on a great truth. It is a rich, glorious, and ancient mystery, hidden from past ages and generations, but now made manifest to the saints."

Note that saints are not exalted people. Modern use of the word saint, especially in the Catholic church, suggests that it is the highest level of believer. It is exactly the opposite in the New Testament. Saint is the most ordinary term for everybody in the kingdom. You're a saint if you belong to Christ at all, brand-new and knowing nothing. It is the most inclusive of terms.

The thing that Paul is saying here is, "Listen carefully. The past ages and generations didn't know this. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob didn't know clearly how God would meet the needs of his people. But the mystery has been revealed to me, and I have the privilege of passing it on to you, the saints, the plain folks (including Gentiles!). "Christ in you the hope of glory."

Now, if we jump back in our thinking to the section that began in Colossians 1:15, remember what Paul said there about Christ: He is the Lord of the original creation and the Lord of the new creation. He was at the beginning, and he is the one who sustains the entire universe. He is the one for whom everything exists; he will wrap it all up for himself at the end. He is the master of principalities, powers, angels, demons, history, humanity, the heavenlies, and what is on earth---everything. This is the Christ who is in you. The one who is supreme over all has taken up residence in your life and mine. That is the means by which God is going to put everything right. And the quest Paul is on is to serve that truth and serve these people. He must join them together by letting them know what the Lord has done.

The phrase "the hope of glory" tells us something that the message "Christ in you" explains. It means that there is coming a day when all the glory and the wonder that is his will be true of you. Our hope of glory is our certainty that this world is not all there is and that on the day when Christ is revealed for who he is, we will share in that glory because we are united with him. It's a tremendous anchor in the future that gives us life now.

But in addition, Paul will say farther on in this paragraph, divine strength is what energizes him. He is struggling, laboring with, enduring sleeplessness and difficulty; he spends full nights in prayer; and through longings, chains and all that he is going through, it is the power of Christ that sustains him. That's what he says in verse 29: "...striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." So while the message "Christ in you" is about the future, it is also about the present. It's about all that we have to face and how we will face it right now---by the power of the Lord of all, who has taken up residence in us. He will meet our need, whether it is for endurance, courage, wisdom, or love for people we can't love. Whatever the power requirement in our life is right now, his power is mightily at work within us because Christ is in us.

## **COMPLETE IN CHRIST**

Verses 28 and 29 talk about the quest in language that attempts to help us see Paul's actual activities. The day that he was called on the Damascus road, the Lord said, "He is to carry my name, to take it with him...." And now this is Paul in maturity, reflecting back on what it meant all those decades to have done that. What he says is, "...we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ." Every man means every person---every man, woman, child, adult, grandparent. Having dual responsibilities to the gospel and to the church, Paul's conviction is that he has to bring the two together by whatever means. He has to make the people of God understand what it is for Christ to be in them.

The first means mentioned to help people understand is proclamation, to proclaim Christ. That means everywhere we go we're going to talk about him. The truth must be broadcast widely. He also says that he admonishes everyone. Admonition is very personal; it has to do with challenging you and me directly with the issues in our lives. It's a lot like counseling. If we're sitting down together privately and talking about your life, we're going to apply this truth to your life.

He says further that he teaches everyone. That means we give a class on this truth---get everybody together with notebooks, outlines, and so forth. The gospel should be laid out systematically and thoroughly whenever possible.

Paul's responsibility to the gospel and to the church is that he must, by whatever means, with the power of God struggling in him, do everything he can to let this truth sink into people's lives so that they can be changed by it. And the goal of all that he says, is that everybody should be presented mature, or complete, in Christ. Everybody should grow up so that real, mature Christianity takes place, not just paddling in the shallows, failing at the same things over and over again, always on a roller-coaster ride emotionally, receiving the Lord every third week because we're not sure that we're really Christians. His aim is mature Christians who know how to handle life, who are sent out on quests of their own, who understand what their gifts are, who are living as God intended them to live.

This would make a good movie, wouldn't it? If you have a good imagination, you can see Paul, a short bald man with bowlegs and a big nose, with manacles around his hands and burly Roman guards hulking over him. He's under house arrest in Rome, writing letters to his friends about the tough experiences he's been through. Someone suggested that Ben Kingsley would be good to play the role of Paul, since he played Ghandi so well. But although the drama of this would make it a great movie, that's not why Paul is writing it. He is speaking of himself because he wants the quest he is on to inspire others to choose the same, to hear the voice of God in their lives setting them on a challenge of their own, so that everyone should become mature in Christ.

Don't miss the fact that in verse 28 everyone is mentioned three times: Teaching every man, admonishing every man, and presenting every man mature in Christ. It's not just for the elite. The deceivers who were attacking the Colossians would create an elite in-crowd of advanced folks looking down on the ordinary riffraff. But Paul will have none of that. It's no good unless everyone is included.

## **DEFEATING DECEIVERS**

Now in verse 1 of chapter 2, Paul takes what he has spoken of in powerful, large terms about his whole life and applies it to the Colossian church in particular:

For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf, and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I say this in order that no one may delude you with persuasive argument. For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ.

Paul loved these people more in absence than the deceivers did who were present with them. He hurt more for them, rejoiced more that they were stable, struggled on their behalf in prayer, and wanted them to be united together in love, he with them and they with one another. The richness of real Christianity cannot be experienced except in community. He was saying, "I long that our hearts be united together in love. Those people are trying to divide you, but I would love to see you more united together than you've ever been. I care more about you than they do. Don't let anyone deceive you by starting with Christianity and proceeding to lies."

Paul began his Christian life struck blind by a light from heaven. He proceeded through misunderstanding in which his Jewish friends rejected him and his fellow Christians feared him. He was finally given public

ministry only to be undercut and misunderstood time and time again. At times his friends deserted him and his enemies jailed him. Read 2 Corinthians 11:23-33 if you want the whole history of both the physical and emotional deprivations he went through. The quest he was given at the beginning would cost him decades of ministry in which only the strength of God could get him through, that power at work mightily within him. And his intention in writing about himself and the discovery of the extraordinary mystery now revealed, that Christ is in us, is to say that this life is worth everything. His life as a challenge and a quest can be an inspiration to us to choose the same.

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