

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. Perhaps the greatest of these is found in Greek mythology with the story of Odysseus or Hercules. Of course we can go to a little more "modern" literature and go to the Knights of the Round Table and King Arthur's Camelot as the story unfolds in the search for the Holy Grail. Indiana Jones takes up the same theme in the well known film *The Raiders of the Lost Ark*. In each case the hero sets off on an extraordinary challenge, questing for something of great value, suffering and being deprived, but extending himself because the challenge is so worthy of the sacrifice.

Perhaps the greatest of these "quests" is the life of the Apostle Paul. Remember he began as Saul of Tarsus, a religious man who dedicated himself to the quest of eradicating the heresy of those who had begun to follow "the Way." After his experience on the Road to Damascus he objective changed, though his passion for the quest remained just as strong. Today we look at the result of that passion and what it meant for him to live a life filled by Christ.

To do an adequate job with our text today, we need to begin at the beginning of Paul's quest. It begins with him hating Jesus and his cause. He was a fierce defender of Judaism against what he saw as an incursion of Christianity. In the Book of Acts, chapters 7-9, we see the full story. He enables the killing of Stephen, eventually gaining letters to persecute, imprison, and murder the Jews who had become followers of Jesus in Damascus. It is on that journey that Christ speaks to him.

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. And falling to the ground he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. (Acts 9:1-5 ESV).

The story states how he was blinded by the light of Christ and is subsequently sent to a Christian named Ananias. He was understandably nervous about meeting Saul, but the Lord convinced him explaining that He has set Saul on a quest and a call to carry the Gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:6-18). That brings us to our text today. It is Paul's reflection on what it was to live that way. There are a couple of themes from the call to Paul that reappear in this text.

- ✚ One is Jesus' receiving the persecution of his children as persecution of himself. Saul had been persecuting Christians, imprisoning them and overseeing their torture through beatings and execution. But Jesus said, "Why do you persecute me?" When we suffer, Jesus suffers.
- ✚ Another theme is that in suffering for Jesus' name Paul was entering into intimacy with Christ.

SO, TAKE YOUR BIBLES, PLEASE...

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister. 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, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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. 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 1:21-29 ESV).

The word he uses in the first sentence, “minister,” is not a term for an exalted position, but for an ordinary servant who has responsibility to his superiors; it is someone who must give up his life and his rights to that which is greater than he is. We sometimes hear this word used in a way that exalts the object of the person it is applied to. For example, we hear of a minister of state, or prime minister of a nation. In the New Testament it is just the opposite. A servant or a minister is the subordinate whose rights are less important than those superior to him. For the Apostle Paul, he understood that he was always a servant of Christ. He was under his authority. Today there are many who would act as if they were the authority in the church, both preachers and leaders. If we are true “ministers” that can never be the case. We, like Paul, have been given the opportunity and joy of serving both the Gospel and the church.

So, what does it mean to be a servant with Christ... here are some suggestions from the heart of this great man of God:

First, It Means That We Are Fellow Sufferers With Christ.

Paul writes, “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, of which I became a minister.”

The suffering of Christ is, of course, the Cross. Paul does not mean to say that Christ's death was somehow incomplete. There is nothing lacking in the work of Christ on the Cross. Jesus has paid entirely for our sins. 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 anything further from anyone else that man may be saved.

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 by faith in every generation is ultimately the hatred of the Lord Jesus. He was misunderstood, denigrated, beaten, ridiculed, cut off, and executed as a criminal in his own lifetime. Paul knew the world was still committed to its sinfulness and therefore would hate him. And, it would perpetrate these acts of hatred on him and every other believer.

There is great comfort in this knowledge. Just as it hurt Jesus then, it hurts him now to see his people suffer on behalf of the message of grace. But, this great quest we have begun, a challenge to reflect the character and life of Christ in our life, is well worth the sacrifice! We can know that worth by resting in the knowledge that Jesus knows and feels our pain.

Second, It Means We Become Servants of the Gospel.

Listen carefully to what Paul says in verses 26-27: "...the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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."

The apostle's excitement is centered in the message. It was a mystery, hidden through the ages, but now revealed. His quest was not over when he found it. It had just begun. His quest was to show the way to everyone he could. He had been allowed to find this great truth so that he could show it to others. The point he is making so clearly is that the past ages and generations didn't know this. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob didn't clearly know how God would meet the needs of His people. But the mystery had been revealed to Paul and to every believer who would follow from then on. You and I know this great mystery! It is simply "Christ in you, the hope of glory"!

Third, It Means That We Become Teachers of the Gospel.

Paul uses three phrases in verse 28-29. Look at the passage again.

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.

1. **First, Paul uses the phrase "warning everyone."** This word is rendered "admonishing" in other translations. It is very personal. It has to do with challenging each other directly with the issues of life. It's a lot like counseling in that when we sit down and share with one another we must talk about our lives. The application of the gospel is the basis for what we say.
2. **Second, Paul uses the phrase "teaching everyone."** It is a clear directive for us to help people understand Christ. We do this by proclaiming Christ. At first glance we might come to believe this is accomplished only through preaching or teaching. However, it is much broader than merely the spoken word. It is teaching, explaining, showing, and modeling the truth we have come to understand about the gift of Christ for our redemption. It is a simple declaration that we teach in every situation of life.
3. **Third, Paul uses the phrase "that we may present every man mature in Christ."** Paul understands the responsibility toward the end that everyone will ultimately grow up. That's the goal of the warning and teaching. It is to complete everyone. Everybody should grow up so that real, mature Christianity take place; not just crawling around the nursery. Paul's goal, and ours, is mature Christians who know how to handle life, who are sent out on their own, who understand what their gifts are, and who are living as god intended them to live.

A Final Thought

The Apostle Paul knew what a challenging quest looked like. Listen to his brief biography:

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. (2 Corinthians 11:23-33 ESV).

How's your quest?