

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

Volume 26, Number 12

March 21, 2010



Serving Sheep

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; 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 2:1–3)

My wife's family adopted a humorous cliché from their mother's childhood. Their mother was the daughter of a preacher who for a time served a church in Mena, Arkansas. A preacher who belonged to that church was preaching on one occasion at an evening service. During the day, he drove a lumber delivery truck. To illustrate how much he cherished meeting with his church friends, he made a comment, "I've driven through the heat and through the rain. I've driven through the snow to attend church. Why, today I drove to Vandervoort and back." Vandervoort is a small community located a whopping twenty-one miles from Mena. To exaggerate the sacrifice of doing something, our family humorously quips, "I've been to Vandervoort and back."

Paul acknowledges an unnamed conflict, a "great conflict," that he endured for the Colossians and other churches in that region. His objective was not to convince people of his great trial, but for the benefit of others, "...for you...."

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.... Paul affirms a similar general objective in the preaching of the gospel, indeed in the exercise of all spiritual gifts, in Ephesians 4:13-16.

Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh

increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:13–16)

What is the New Testament objective of gospel preaching? Preacher and congregation, along with individual members of the congregation, are cultivated in their spiritual growth toward God and toward each other. The comfort of the gospel must anchor in God, but Paul nudges our focus as well toward each other, "...hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love..." A preacher must first and foremost, preach to himself before he preaches to a congregation. The application of the truths of the gospel cannot effectively go from his mouth to the hearers' hearts if he has carefully shielded his own heart from those same truths. "Be thou an example..." (1 Timothy 4:12) The man who fails as a personal example will also fail to invade and transform others by his preaching.

How can a preacher attain this daunting challenge? At first glance, we might think he must become the sinless, perfect model of the Christian life. No, sometimes he might better reach people by acknowledging his own struggles and trials. He need not dwell on them, but an honest confession that he struggles with the same trials as his hearers helps them. Too many preachers strive to become so sinless that they start believing they are sinless. Consequently, their preaching will become so starchy, legalistic, and demanding on their hearers that people will react in frustrated hopelessness, and often simply walk away and stop trying.

The goal is for all hearts touched by the gospel to become so intertwined as to be inseparable. Paul describes the outcome of this intertwined love; "...their hearts might be comforted...." He continues the development of this benefit in the terms that follow.

1. ...and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding....

2. ...to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ....

In many circles today, "assurance" has become a buzz word for mind control. "How can I give you any assurance of your salvation unless you show me the fruits of your faith by doing...?" In other words one man seeks to control another by either extending or withholding assurance to him/her. This mind control attitude never appears in Biblical teachings regarding assurance. In the New Testament we discover assurance from the Holy Spirit, not from another human, as we walk the walk of faith and as we serve others. The moment we make gaining more assurance of our own salvation our objective, we guarantee that we'll never have enough assurance. We'll become the perpetual dry sponge that can never absorb enough water to become satisfied. To the extent that we forget about self, including how much assurance we have or do not have, investing our life and energy in service to others, the more abundantly we shall enjoy the lavish comforts of God's assurance. You see this pattern in our study verse. As Paul invested his life in service to others, concerned for them and for their faith, both he and they realized "...all riches of the full assurance of understanding...." The Holy Spirit, not another human, is the true "Assurer" for children of God.

We further notice that this assurance grows out of understanding, understanding that resulted from Paul's preaching and ministry to these people. It is an integral part of that intertwining bond between God and His people, as well as their bond with each other. A child of God who isolates himself/herself from other believers shall inevitably lose assurance. Isolation can occur in one of two ways. We may simply stop attending church and seeking occasion to meet with and fellowship with other believers. Our sole companions become secular, and so does our life perspective. Assurance goes out the window. Fully as devastating to our assurance, we may attend church, but carefully avoid real transparent interaction with other believers. We show up, but we carefully posture ourselves behind any one of a nearly countless list of shelters that hide us from other believers and them from us. Either way, assurance shrivels up and dies, and we lose that rich comfort and understanding.

...to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.... Paul just discussed a mystery that God hid from saints in ages past, but has now revealed. That mystery is "...Christ in you, the hope of glory...." (Colossians 1:27) There is no good reason in this context to think that Paul is dealing with another unnamed mystery. In this verse

"acknowledgement" was translated from a precise word.

...denotes in ordinary Greek the intelligent comprehension of an object or matter, whether this comes for the first time, or comes afresh, into the consideration of the one who grasps it ("to come to know," "to experience," "to perceive [again]") or whether it is already present ("to perceive").¹

Through the work of the gospel, we come to an "intelligent comprehension" of the mystery of "...Christ in you, the hope of glory..." and this mystery is wrapped up in the greater mystery of the Father and of Jesus.

In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. We discover treasures that retain their value, regardless of the ebbs and flows of human economics, in God, not in retirement funds or bank accounts. Paul further adds shape and substance to our concept of Biblical faith by his use of "wisdom and knowledge." Scripture never describes the Christian's hope to a "leap in the dark." ***If we view the walk of faith as a leap, we should see it as a leap into the light and out of darkness, never as a leap into the dark.*** We should learn from wise people around us, but we learn from them to the extent that they learn from God and impart that knowledge to us. The source of all worthwhile wisdom and knowledge is God alone. Our generation treasures knowledge and wisdom highly, but it often manifests confusion as to what is wise. God defines wisdom quite differently from human scholastics.

And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; And to depart from evil is understanding. (Job 28:28)

Fearing God has more to do with our reverence toward God and our worshipful respect of Him than morbid dread. God seeks our love and worship, not our morbid fear. If you had a healthy relationship with your parents as a child, you "feared" them in that you desired deeply to honor them, never dishonor them, because of your love and respect for them. I believe that is the point Job intends by fearing God. In both definitions, wisdom and understanding, the dominant quality is moral or ethical, not our IQ. A little child may thus exceed an old man or woman in true wisdom. Here is our treasure. Guard it as the precious possession that it truly is.

¹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-).

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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