

... all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge

Hosea 1:2–10

Psalm 85

Colossians 1:24-2:5

Luke 11:1–13

Text: Colossians 1:27, 2:2-3

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.

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Introduction

In an effort to better inform budgets and policies, Canada's Department of Finance has attempted to measure the meaning of life. A March 2022 news [article](#) on this measurement effort cited a recent survey finding that about 60 per cent of Canadians over age 15 have a strong sense of meaning and purpose. The question asked as part of this ongoing Canadian Social Survey was, "to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile," (number from 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely)). A "strong" sense of meaning and purpose was judged to be 8 or higher. The finding's flipside reveals that 40 per cent of Canadians are less than enthusiastic regarding the worthwhile nature of what they do.

In the Spring 2022 Issue of the University of Toronto Magazine a series of 'What If' articles described research that seeks to "redefine what's possible for the good of our city, our country and our planet." One of those 'what ifs' was, "what if U of T students could help improve the mental health of youth worldwide." The article described a research initiative that was launched "in response to a dramatic increase in Ontario post-secondary students reporting depression and anxiety and surging demand for counseling and related support." Absent from research, in my view, was any 'what if' regarding human spiritual life.

1. What strikes me is the way things are framed in these publications. In the article about the meaning of life, significance is measured by your sense about what you deem worthwhile. In the conversation about the increase of students reporting depression and anxiety these were understood as matters pertaining to mental health. Absent from the talk of human need is the spiritual—conversation is about what is 'worthwhile' and 'mental health', for example. I am not suggesting

concern for mental health needs or apprehension of worthwhile endeavour is unwarranted; I am simply pointing out that, culturally speaking, the spiritual has been set to the side. Anything spiritual, if thought about at all, is subsumed under other categories like ‘worthwhile’ and ‘mental health.’ In the entire list of twenty ‘what if’ research possibilities in the U of T magazine there was nothing about religion. It did include, for example, ‘what if we could build robots for almost any purpose?’

Another thing that strikes me is the energy that is being expended in these projects. Canada’s finance department spending energy to determine Canadian’s sense of meaning and purpose to inform budgeting and policy. The energy expended by Canada’s largest University in pursuit of a variety of subjects and possibilities. Clearly these energies are thought to be in pursuit of things considered important.

The Apostle Paul is in prison when he writes his letter to these Colossian Christians. Imprisonment is part of what he refers to when he says that he rejoices “in my suffering for your sake.” Paul also speaks of ‘his toil and struggle with all energy’ in this work he undertakes for them. The words Paul uses here come from athletic competition. Akin to when you hear athletes talking about the pursuit of getting to the next level. What is Paul expending all this energy for? What is so important that he drives himself to achieve? Let’s listen to him again:

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.*

I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, *Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

Is it really true that Jesus Christ is this important to human life? Christ in you the hope of glory, in whom are hidden ALL the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Paul thinks so. Paul clearly knows what is on offer to people in his world. He is a highly educated man. He is a leader everywhere he goes (before and after conversion). He is familiar with the emphasis of the ideologies of his time—he writes this letter and does his work of making Christ known diligently “so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.” He writes in his Philippian letter about great achievements that he regards as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8)

Is it really true that all—ALL—the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ? The gospel answers with an emphatic, yes! Paul had either penned or

cited an early church hymn, recorded a few sentences before the point in his letter we are reading from today, that makes this proclamation: “in him (Jesus) all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”

To be sure, scientific things have to be learned scientifically. Each branch of knowledge has its own logic. Studying the Bible won't disclose the distance we are from the Sun. However, if, as the scripture bears witness, Jesus is the one through whom and for whom all things have been created then he knows them inside and out. To probe the wonders of the world scientifically is to probe the wonder of his handiwork. Astronomer David Block, in his testimony of coming to faith in Christ, said the fruit of his study revealed a universe so beautiful both visually and mathematically that the idea of the universe being designed by a Master Artist resonated with him.

The U of T magazine article on robots noted a number of amazing developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI). How robotics assist surgeons to eliminate hand tremors when performing open heart surgery and social robots that can help seniors live independently. Recently, my optometrist said that it is anticipated that cataract surgery will be the first one to be done completely by robotics. As amazing as all this might be, artificial intelligence will never be able to acquaint us with our deepest human need—that we are sinners in need of a saviour. According to the gospel, the profoundest human need is spiritual and only God can acquaint us with who he is and what he has done for us.

2. I want to come back to the energies Paul is willing to expend, the price he is willing to pay so that people can know Christ. Paul said that he rejoiced in his suffering so that this mystery could be known—the mystery of Christ. Paul uses the word mystery not to mean mysterious but to mean hidden until it was made known. In the older testament book of Daniel Nebuchadnezzar's dream was said to be a mystery until the meaning was revealed to Daniel. Then it became known. Paul speaks of his commission as an Apostle to the Gentiles to make the gospel known to them—what once was hidden is now revealed.

In his commentary on Colossians, N.T. Wright imagines a conversation that might go on if trees could talk. “Here is an old, weathered and seasoned oak tree, talking to the small sapling that is just started to grow up nearby. Soon it will be autumn, and the winds will start to blow hard and cold. But you will be safe. I'll take care of you. The wind can do its worst to me. I don't mind if I have to lose a few

branches here and there in the process. What matters is that while you are young and weak I will take the full force of the wintry wind on myself, and let you grow in safety.”¹

This is something like what Paul is saying to this young church whom he has never met face to face. It seems as though Paul is drawing the enemy fire; as long as he stays in prison, those who are opposed to the gospel imagined they have gunned it down. In concentrating on Paul, and giving him a bad time, they're not bothering about the young Christians who are growing up around him.

Paul also says that he is completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church. Now does Paul mean that Christ's suffering is inadequate for our salvation? No. Paul sees the suffering of the church not as an addition to Christ's suffering but as an extension of it. Jesus said that the world would hate his followers because it first hated him. Paul, who was persecuting Christians when accosted on the road to Damascus, was told that he was, in fact, persecuting Christ himself. The church is the body of Christ in the world; its suffering is his suffering.

I point out Paul's willingness to endure much for the sake of the gospel so that we might get a window into the heart of Paul and understand his passion that knowing Christ is crucial for human life. Nothing rises above this in importance and nothing could possibly be as foundational. Christ in you eclipses everything else with its brilliance. Everything revolves around Christ in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Paul hints at a challenge that lurks in the background of what he wants to say to the Colossian Christians, “I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.” We are not sure what arguments or philosophy Paul has in mind—he says enough for the person living in Colossae to know. What would Paul write to us in our era? Our era is thought to be the age of information. We are under the impression that we have sufficient knowledge for life at our finger tips via some electronic device. Perhaps more information than we could ever need or digest. And then we worry about what is disinformation and misinformation. How do we navigate what may seem knowledge overload? I think Paul would say much the same about what ought to be the focus of our attention. “Don't be taken captive by the overflow of information. I want your hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that you may have all the riches of

¹ N.T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, WJK press, 2004. p. 158

assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.'

3. Finally I invite you to note the integration between mind and heart that is an important feature of Paul's understanding of how the salvation process works out in the individual and group. How this works out in the practicality of life. Paul wants his hearers 'to have all the riches of assured understanding'; note the integration of heart and mind—assured understanding. In his Romans letter he says it this way, "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." (Romans 8:15-16)

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me". The tense of the verbs here mean 'keep on hearing', etc., continuous action. Needless to say Jesus doesn't mean that we are constantly "hearing things", as though we were undergoing auditory hallucinations. Jesus means that his people are unremittingly possessed of the conviction that he is the one to be followed. They continue to hear his voice inasmuch as they are never without the conviction that he is the good shepherd and ever will be. It is not a startling experience; it is not an ecstatic experience. But it is the foundation on which the life of any Christian is built. "My sheep keep on hearing my voice; I continue to know them, and they keep on following me."

Pause for a moment and reflect; are you ever without the conviction that "in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge?" Where does that conviction come from? The conviction is what Paul means by "the riches of assured understanding." And the truth about Christ in whom are hidden all these treasures is to be more than a bumper sticker or motivational slogan. It is to be experienced.

Today we read where Jesus taught his followers how to pray and the importance of persistence in prayer. Jesus both taught this and exemplified it in his own persistent prayer life. Prayer is at the heart of how we experience 'assured understanding.' Jesus calls us to persist because the One he calls the Father is openhanded and generous. "So, I say unto you," says our Lord, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Put that saying together with what Paul is declaring about Christ—all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Bring everything you face in life to him in prayer and see how he will provide generously of his wisdom and knowledge.

“Christ in you, the hope of glory.” “Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”