

Title: *What Do You Struggle For?*

Text: Colossians 1:24-2:5

In his novel *Ah, But Your Land Is Beautiful*, Alan Paton tells the story of Robert Mansfield, the headmaster of a school in South Africa during the days of apartheid, a cruel system of racial segregation. When Mansfield's school was barred from competing against a black school, he finally took a stand against apartheid and resigned his post. A friend said to him, "You know you will be wounded. Do you know that?"

Mansfield replied, pointing to heaven, "When I go up there ... the Big Judge will say to me, 'Where are your wounds?' If I say I haven't any, he will say, 'Was there nothing to fight for?' I couldn't face that question."

What is there in your life that you are willing to fight for or even to be inconvenienced for? What are some of the causes for which you've taken a stand and for which you've received some battle scars? You can become cynical and jaded and lament that every time anyone dares to stick their head above the crowd, they'll get shot at.

It's interesting that in our Fall Mission Offering, we recognized that we support several different ministries that work with "at risk" children -- Machaseh, Days of Hope and Camp David. You might say, "That is definitely a cause that is worth standing up for and taking a few battle scars."

Maybe you've felt bad about the way someone at work or at school was being treated and you said, "Enough! They need a friend. It's not right for anyone to be treated that way," and rather than being applauded for it, some of your friends – or those you thought were your friends – turned on you.

Maybe there's a political cause that you feel strongly about. Abortion is one of the most emotional and divisive issues of the day and regardless of where you come down on that issue, most of us ought to be able to agree that it's a good thing to let a young woman who is abortion-minded know that there are alternatives to abortion. That's why I admire people like our own Carol Durk and others like Joe Dalton of the Pregnancy Resource Center here in Rolla who engage in ministry to women in crisis situations. They've found a cause that's worth taking some scars for in their estimation.

What is that issue for you? For Paul, it was so that everyone could get to the point of knowing Christ and growing to completeness in him. He certainly paid the price and was willing to endure adversity.

In II Corinthians 11, he is defending himself against his critics and he says, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in

danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”

Paul is writing the letter to the Colossians to a church which he himself has never visited. Having said that, some folks may feel as if he’s presuming something upon himself to write a letter to them. There are certain niceties and pleasantries that he has to take into account. They have to have some sense of who this man is who would write a letter which would be read to the congregation when they meet together. He’s told us who Christ is – the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. He’s also the firstborn from among the dead and the head of the body. He is the one in whom all the fullness of God dwells. He has reconciled us to God by his blood shed on the cross and through his physical body. He did what only he could do. No one else is qualified to do what Jesus did.

If you want to talk about everything that needed to be done to accomplish our salvation, being done in Jesus Christ, you would be correct. The suffering that Jesus experienced on the cross was complete and total and sufficient to accomplish our salvation. When he breathed his last, the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom signifying that everything that needed to be done was now done.

That’s why it’s curious and scholars puzzle over Paul’s words when he says, “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.” You read that and you have to ask yourself if maybe Paul hadn’t gotten just a little too full of himself. Who does he think he is to be raising the thought that he could add anything to what Christ has already done?

You have to ask, “Why did Christ suffer and why did Paul suffer?” Both of them suffered. One of the best summaries I came across and I believe this is a helpful explanation, “Jesus died to accomplish salvation and Paul suffered to spread the news or to expand salvation.”

Jesus paid it all and Jesus did everything that needed to be done, but yet there’s still something lacking, strange as that may sound. What is lacking is that there are still vast areas of spiritual darkness in this world where that message has yet to be heard. There are people living in spiritual emptiness whose emptiness can only be filled by Jesus Christ who haven’t heard the message of Jesus Christ presented to them in such a way that they can understand who he is and place their faith in him.

That’s why Paul was the first missionary. He was on his way to Damascus as the great persecutor of the church. He saw a great light and heard the voice saying, “I am Jesus who you are persecuting.” Not long after that, a man in Damascus by the name of Ananias heard the Lord telling him that he should go and reach out to Paul. Ananias knew Paul’s reputation and didn’t

want any part of this man. As Ananias protested, the Lord said to him, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

So part of Paul's calling involved suffering and he was willing to endure adversity and difficulty because of the greatness he had found in Jesus Christ. Continuing in verse 25, he says, "I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – ²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.

Paul uses a word that is used a lot in the New Testament and that is the word mystery. Most of us like a good mystery. In order to keep you watching any television show, there has to be a little bit of mystery – how's this thing going to turn out. Is there going to be some kind of plot twist where the person I think did it, didn't really do it or some other kind of issue will surface which will totally change the complexion of things. You wouldn't classify *Law and Order* as a mystery, but they're big on doing that.

Paul talks a lot about mystery. especially in the book of Ephesians. In 1:9,10, he says, "⁹ And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

In Ephesians 3, he says, "² Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³ that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴ In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶ This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. ⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things."

In the biblical sense, mystery is something that we wouldn't know if God didn't reveal it to us. It's something that we would not have any way of being able to figure out or reason out on our own. Paul says, "God has revealed to me a mystery that was kept hidden for generations and generations but now has been made known. That is that God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles, the glorious riches of the mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

What a beautiful phrase that is! It's so simple and yet so profound. It is Christ who is the hope of glory in you. The reason this is significant and the reason that this would be in the letter to the Colossians is that they had a diminished view of Christ. He was but the last in a series of spiritual emanations almost like an infinite progression. In that view, he could not have been

God. He would have had to be a certain distance removed from him. There are a couple of different points that need to be emphasized. First is that it is **Christ** in you who is the hope of glory. Second, it is Christ **in you** or Christ **among you** who is the hope of glory.

C.S. Lewis in his inimitable way has a way of helping us understand the connection between the suffering that comes with Christ in us being the hope of glory. He writes:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but He is building up a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

There are a lot of different thoughts about how one can come to experience glory or what the hope of glory is. The gnostic heresy that was of particular concern in Colossae and in Laodicea taught that glory was obtained by making your way up the ladder through this series of spiritual emanations until you acquired the special knowledge that equaled glory.

Paul wrote about his own people in Romans 9: Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

The average Hebrew person upon reading those words (or at least the first half of that statement) would say, “Durn right, theirs is the glory. It belongs to us and we don’t intend to share! We’re God’s chosen people.” Paul says, “It started out that way, but God didn’t intend for it to stay that way. The mystery of the ages that Paul is now writing about is that the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile has been destroyed and now it is through Christ that everyone has the hope of glory.

Paul says, “My calling is to make known among the Gentiles this glorious promise which is that glory comes through Jesus Christ and Christ in you and among you.”

In verse 29, Paul says, “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.” So what is it that Paul was willing to struggle, to suffer and to endure abuse and attack for? It was to make sure that everyone had the opportunity to hear the message of Jesus Christ presented in such a way that they could understand who he is and respond to him. Then it is that they grow in him and one day be presented mature and complete. You’ve heard me talk about the continuum between -10 and 10. -10 would be far away from God, +10 would be a mature, passionate, disciple of Jesus Christ. 0

is ground zero of your commitment to Christ. Our job is to get people to be a +10 in their walk with Christ. Getting people saved is getting them to ground zero. That's only half of the job. Paul says, I struggle with all the energy that God gives me so that I can present everyone perfect and complete in Christ. That word perfect is not talking moral sinless perfection. In the biblical sense, perfection is fulfilling the purpose for which you were made. In 2:1, Paul reiterates, "I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally." In 2:4 and 5, he says again, "I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.

⁵ For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is."

He wants them to know Christ and to be useful for him, to fulfill all the high purpose that God had in mind when he created them and saved them? What is God's purpose? There are some things that are the same for all of us. It's stated in 2:2 when Paul says, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." That we know him, grow in relationship with him, walk with him.

Then there are other parts of that that are different for each person. My walk has taken me through 2 seminaries and several churches in "professional, church-related vocational service." In other words, I'm a pastor. Most of you have taken a different path, whether it's as a rancher, or a university professor, or an engineer, or a stay-at-home mom. There are ways that we help people fulfill their purpose in Christ – serving in the church, going on mission trips, enduring through adversity.

How much are we willing to "put ourselves out and to suffer."

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