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EDINBURGH

Rejoicing in Mystery.

As Christians we are called to two things that are very hard to hold together: humility and confidence.

This balance is needed in all sorts of areas of our lives, but, for those of us who are Christians, it's especially important in how much we think we understand stuff.

We should be humble in how much we think we can understand and know, as creatures, with limited capacities, who can't know everything. This should lead to a huge degree of intellectual humility.

However, despite our limited capacities, the Bible tells us that the One who has unlimited capacities, who knows everything, has revealed truth to us. Therefore, we should be very confident in what we know, not because of our ability to think, but because of who revealed it to us.

This is a very difficult tightrope to walk. However, we must try to walk it, for the simple fact that we all know what happen if we fall off either side, and it's not pretty.

Humility problems.

Our whole post modern culture has fallen off the humility side- we can't really know anything about the world out there, so the only things that matter are the subjective 'truths'. It's a humility that strangely leads to a different kind of arrogance, that starts by saying I can't work things out properly because of my limitations and ends up making me the only one who can speak authoritatively on who I am, how I should live and even what the world is like.

In the Christian world this kind of thinking is having an influence. I know many Christian friends, who would be openly 'deconstructing' their faith, questioning the

things they've believed and thinking seriously through what is from God and what is just human tradition and even deception.

It's good to ask those sorts of questions, but the problem comes when you deconstruct so much that you have no foundation left to stand on at all, and completely lose your anchor. This can lead to people calling themselves Christians, but hardly being able to tell you what that means.

Confidence problems.

But there is also a chance of an overconfidence in our own wisdom and understanding.

Again, the world seems to be here, especially in the moral sphere, where increasingly, anyone who transgresses or even questions western liberal values are vilified and humiliated and blacklisted.

However, it's in the church where this can be most upsetting. A large chunk of the evangelical church (particularly in America) has gained an unflinching certainty on a whole load of issues that seems to be pretty hard to justify. These ideas can make Christians look silly, but also things can make Christians look uncaring and unloving which is a far bigger problem.

One advert for a bible course read:

Do you want EXPLOSIVE SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

Do you want to finally understand the whole Bible?

Do you want to confidently know how God feels about you?

Do you want to be a supernaturally equipped leader?

We have removed the HASSLE of a profound Bible education:

1. Learn on your schedule at home
2. We have a proven track record of giving Explosive Spiritual Growth
3. At an incredible price

We are here to help! Registration is open and we have limited DIAMOND level spots available.

Two things struck me here:

- **understand the whole Bible.** I think I know what they mean, but in the context that seems a bit weird. Is that the goal of the Bible to understand everything in it? We'll come back to that.
- **A very pragmatic approach to faith.** Do you want to be a perfect Christian? Here's 4 easy steps.

In the evangelical church, that sort of pragmatic, self-help style is very common, and it breeds a kind of confidence that I find problematic, because life isn't like that. You cannot buy explosive spiritual growth, and if you think you can, you're going to crash and burn.

But then again, we kind of should be able to understand the Bible, shouldn't we? And there must be ways to grow?

This is confusing, so what do we do?

Well, I want to look at what the apostle Paul says about this, because I don't understand everything that he wrote, but God has given his writings to us as a way to approach difficult questions like this.

Colossians 1:24-2:4

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 generation but now revealed to his saints.

It's important to realise that when Paul writes about the mystery, he means something slightly different to what we mean:

for us, mystery means an unclear truth that we should marvel at, but can only partly understand (at best). For Greek thinkers it was slightly different, it meant a divine reality that we can only work out if God (or the gods) reveal it to us.

This is what Paul has said has happened. He's saying: you guys had no idea what God was up to in the world, but now you do, because He's told you. It was something shrouded in a fog, but now it has come out of the fog and is staring you in the face.

He continues in verse 27: *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.*

Here we discover that the mystery that has been revealed is Jesus. This is not exactly what we're looking for. We'd expect a revealed mystery to be like an answer to a tricky question such as: is God loving or angry?

Instead of new knowledge or wisdom, Paul gives us a person. Then Paul continues in verses 28-29 and 2:1-4:

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 in me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Paul's job was to make God's word fully known, he prayed that the Colossians would reach full assurance of understanding. He was an agent of God's intention to reveal things to us, deep, profound things that we could never work out if He didn't tell us, but He's still able to talk of a present hiddenness!

All that wisdom and knowledge, all those things you want to know, all those questions you want answered; they are in Jesus. But they're hidden in him.

Two things from this that are really helpful for us I think:

1. We, as Christians, need to know that some things are still hidden from us.

Now, this is not to say that these things will all be hidden from us forever.

The image that comes to me repeatedly throughout the passage is a treasure map. It like God says there's a treasure, it's all wisdom and knowledge, and here's the map. X marks the spot. And we follow the map and find the X and what do we find? Jesus. And then we ask- but where's the treasure? And Jesus says, here's a spade, get digging.

A. Wisdom and Knowledge is hidden to encourage us to dig deeper.

The profound things of God are not just floating around on the surface, for us to trip over. We'll need to dig. We'll need to wrestle with the Bible, we'll need to press on in prayer, and we'll need to persevere with relationships in the church, Jesus' body. All of those things are methods of digging.

So, part of this hiddenness encourages us to dig deep in our faith, to like Paul, toil, and struggle to grow.

Can I ask you? Do you know how to dig and toil in your relationship with God, or do you think 'I'm in, ticket to heaven, nice friends at church, I've got it all'. I think God would say, yes, you've got some great things, but there are whole treasure troves available to you. But you'll need to dig.

But even as we do that, we can't escape the fact that there are some things that will always remain hidden.

B. There is a bottom to the hole.

When digging a hole, it is easy at first, it then gets tougher but you can continue, but finally you can go no further and have to stop.

This passage doesn't necessarily tell us that Paul felt that there were some treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden forever, but in Romans 11 we see that Paul did experience this. Here he had just completed some of his densest theological writings. He's been explaining at length how the Jews still fit into God's plans, and in that he's dug very deep into God's cosmic purposes; predestination, sovereignty, and even how God can use evil to further his purposes.

Yet after all this, he stops, and writes a song, Rom 11:33-36:

'Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! (Notice any similarities with Colossians 2) 'How unsearchable his judgements! and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Who has ever given to God that God should repay Him? For from Him and through Him and to him are all things. To Him be the glory for ever. Amen.'

It's like Paul is saying, I've dug pretty deep here, I've unearthed a load of hidden wisdom and understanding, but I can't go any further. Yes, there are still questions, but I can go no further. This does not lead to frustration for Paul though, but instead

worship.

It's very easy for us to say that God is beyond our understanding. But it's not very easy when we come to the end of our understanding. We are to ask difficult questions and to apply our minds to spiritual things, but we are not to be frustrated with a non-satisfactory answer.

This reaction can take stages,

- First it can be still trusting in God when the bottom of the hole is reached, though this may be a struggle with questions lingering on.
- Second, it is finding peace at this point, having humility, knowing that you can't as a human understand everything of God.
- Thirdly, is finding joy at the bottom of the hole, and worshipping God for the fact that the mystery is a mystery.

This can all take years.

Application for artists.

The other thing we do at the bottom of the hole, for some of us, is make art. Look at Paul, he breaks into song. That's what commentators think this is, a hymn penned by Paul for the churches to sing.

If there's anything that kills creativity and art, it's an overconfident certainty. This is, I think, why Catholics and liberals create better regarded art than evangelicals, because they have high regard for mystery. Although this does not mean we should be comfortable with mystery, if God revealed everything and no art was left, that would be ok. But that is not the case. Yes, we should be confident at what God has revealed to us and dug deep into it, but at the same time, we should have a very healthy embracing of mystery in our relationship with God.

And that gives artists lots of fertile ground to work in.

The evangelical church has reduced art largely to marketing and propaganda. A tool to communicate already known facts, to get other people to understand those facts. That's good, but there is more than that. Art can make sense of things that don't make sense, either theologically, or when things happen that don't fit into our theological grid.

For those of you who aren't artists, please give your creative friends permission to do

this. It will mean they will say risky things, it will mean they will express difficult feelings, and ask difficult questions, a bit like the book of Job, or Ecclesiastes, or the Psalms, or Revelation. Please don't expect them to dot all your theological 'i' and cross all your moral 't's. They may overstep the mark and go too far every now and then. Don't rush in to tell them. They have to make mistakes to create things that matter.

In a world where so much is revealed to us, but so much is still hidden, we need them to help us at the bottom of the hole.

2. Our faith is primarily about a person, not about a set of knowable facts

Remember, the mystery is Jesus and the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him.

This still may be deeply problematic, there may be big questions you have now, philosophical questions about who God is, or theological questions about the Bible. You may think that these questions need answered, and that this sounds like a cop out. You need to go where Paul sends you. Take a break from the big dusty books for a moment, take a break from thinking through arguments, and look at Jesus.

Christianity is primarily about a relationship with a person, not subscription to a list of beliefs. Those two things can overlap but they're not the same.

So to continue my treasure map image: if you are digging hard at the moment, and maybe just getting tired looking for hidden treasure or possibly you've hit the bottom and you've realised that some of this treasure is staying hidden, look up from the hole and look again at the one who gave you the spade.

- Looking at Jesus is not disregarding the evidence. Revisiting the evidence is important. Particularly the resurrection of Jesus. If you're all at sea with all the other stuff, gender politics, questions about sexuality, questions about God's activity in the Old Testament, go back to the question: did Jesus rise from the dead?
- Then, or maybe while doing that re-read the gospels. Savour his words. Meditate on his character. His kindness. His wisdom.
- Pray that you'd experience Him regularly in your life. Locating all wisdom and knowledge in the person of Jesus means that while we love the Bible and it is our main way to know Jesus better, it is not everything. There must be an experiential

element to our faith, or there is no relationship.

Questions:

- What is your instinctive reaction to the idea of there being mystery in our faith?
- What in our church practices might cause us to expect to know more than we can?
- What are the implications of Paul's use of the word "mystery" to mean "*a divine reality that we can't work but which God can make known*" (Colossians 1:26)?
- How can you dig for the hidden things that Jesus wants you to find (Colossians 2:3)?
- What does rejoicing in mystery look like for you (Romans 11:33-36)?
- Our faith is in a Person not a list of facts; what does that mean for how we think about the big questions of life, and for how we evangelise?



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