

Isaiah 42:1-4 (Opening)

- ¹ *Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*
- ² *He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;*
- ³ *a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.*
- ⁴ *He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.*

“Hi, my name’s Phil, and I’m a geek.”

We all have labels, names that people give us, or that we give ourselves, to describe who we are; our background.

I could just as easily say “Hi, I’m Phil, and I’m a veteran.”

Or “Hi, I’m Phil, and I’m a minister.”

Those are some of the nicer labels I’ve picked up over the years. There’s always some that aren’t so nice. Of course, sinner is one of the top ones.

Some people introduce themselves with their job title, like mechanic, carpenter, or “I fix vacuum cleaners”. Of course, some people end up with labels like “Murderer”, “Sex Offender”, “Alcoholic”, or “Liar”.

Labels are labels and we pick them up over the years. The older we get, the more labels we end up with. And the older we get, the more labels we give to others. Bad labels like “mistake”, “loser”, or “stupid”.

These bad labels have a way of making us think we actually deserve them, and they seep into our inner self, making us value ourselves less and less. They make us feel valueless, useless.

Will Rogers said, “You never get a second chance to make a good first impression.”

We always try to make a good first impression when we meet people. We don’t always succeed, but we try. It’s even harder to succeed when you have these bad labels attached to us.

So, I imagine by now I’ve got you either confused or intrigued as to what I’m really going to be talking about today. If you were here back on September first, we talked about the entire letter Paul wrote to the Colossians; who the audience was, what their background was, and where they were in their Christian walk. I also mentioned that it’s very likely that Paul had never been to Colossae. So, how do you write a

letter with this much importance to someone you don't know? Well, you need to make sure your audience knows who you are.

Paul was well known throughout all the churches in what is now Turkey and Greece. He planted a lot of them, but not all. The church at Colossae was probably started by Epaphras, because it says in Colossians 1:7, 8, talking about the Gospel,

Colossians 1:7, 8

⁷ just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf⁸ and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

So, since the Colossians probably didn't know Paul personally, he had to introduce himself to them. They probably knew that Paul was a missionary; a minister, in his terms. They also probably knew that he was in prison in Rome, since Epaphras had come to Rome and told Paul about the churches in Colossae and Laodicea. Epaphras was in fact in prison with Paul in Rome, according to Philemon 23:

Philemon 23

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,

On the other hand, they probably also knew that Paul was a murderer, or at least condoned the murder of many Christians during the years just following the resurrection. He had made a name for himself as a defender of the Jews, and a persecutor of the Way.

That's the way Paul describes himself in Acts 22 1:5

Acts 22:1-5

¹ "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you."

² *And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:*

³ *“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.*

Let’s take a look at how Paul introduces himself to the Colossians:

Colossians 1:24-2:5

²⁴ *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, ²⁵ 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, ²⁶ the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. 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. ²⁸ Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

2 *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, ² 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, ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments. ⁵ For though I am absent in body, yet I*

am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

So, what is Paul talking about here in verse 24? “I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”? I thought Christ was the perfect sacrifice. What could be lacking in Christ’s afflictions?

Well, first off, the word “afflictions” here is different from Christ’s sufferings for our sins. The word here would be better translated, I think, as tribulations. Paul is saying here that he is sharing in the tribulations of the Church, the body of Christ. Since the Church is the body of Christ, any tribulation suffered by the Church is a tribulation suffered by Christ. Keep a marker at Colossians 1:24 and turn to 2 Timothy 1:8-14.

2 Timothy 1:8-14

⁸ Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord, nor of me his prisoner, but share in suffering for the gospel by the power of God, ⁹ who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher, ¹² which is why I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me. ¹³ Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴ By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

Here we see more about Paul’s suffering, and again he ties it in with the overall sufferings of Christ and the Church.

Paul also, back in Colossians, calls himself a “minister”. The Greek word used here is diakonos, which is transliterated in other places in the New Testament as Deacon. I think that’s not accurate. Diakonos is better translated as a servant, or better still, a gofer. “One who executes the commands of another” is the definition Strong has assigned to it. Minister fits, in this context, but in the aspect of one who does things for others, that is, ministers to their needs. We look at Acts 6 as the first appointing of Deacons, but these seven men were simply selected from the group because as the disciples said “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” They were waiters, of sorts.

So, Paul says he’s a waiter, a servant of God, doing His bidding, no matter the cost.

Paul next says something about the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to His saints. Since we’re His saints, those whom He makes holy or sanctified, then we should know what this mystery is, according to what Paul says here. So what is this great mystery that we supposedly know? Let’s look at another letter Paul wrote, this time to the Ephesians. In Ephesians 3:1-11, Paul writes:

Ephesians 3:1-11

¹ For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— ² assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you, ³ how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. ⁴ When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. ⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, ¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.

He tells the Ephesians something very similar to what he tells the Colossians, except here he describes what the mystery is in verse 6:

⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

In John's Gospel, he says something very similar, but much more concisely, which is John's style.

John 1:12, 13

¹² But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

John says we (gentiles) have been brought into God's family through adoption. Adoption gives us the same rights as a birth child in a family, so we are fully one of God's children, if we believe in Jesus as Messiah. Of course, all good children are obedient.

Beginning in chapter 2 of Colossians (have I mentioned how much I really dislike how we break some things up in the Bible?), Paul wants to encourage the Christians in Colossae and Laodicea, through his struggles. Paul also says they will be "knit together" in love. The word that is translated as "knit together" is a compound word from the words for "identified with" and "to board a ship", and is also translated

as to prove, conclude, instruct, (joining thoughts and ideas together), or to hold things together. It's also used to describe healing, as in knitting bones together, and reconciliation, as in rejoining the parts of a broken relationship.

Finally, Paul gives us the reason for his letter in verse 4, "that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." Paul is trying to fix what someone or several people tried to break; he wants to defend the true Gospel, because someone has been teaching things that sounded good, but weren't true.

Many times when Paul introduces himself in his letters or in person (as we see in Acts), he defends himself. Paul had to defend himself to both the Christians and to the Jews. To the Christians, he was a murderer; to the Jews, he was a traitor and a blasphemer, telling lies about God. Paul did what he thought was right in the early parts of the book of Acts, and spent most of his time as an Apostle defending himself because of it. He couldn't get away from the name he had made for himself.

Our pasts define who we are; but they don't define who we will become. We all have a history; bad things we've done in our lives, people we've known, people we've associated with who weren't the best folks to hang around with. Paul had them, too, and wasn't restrained by them.

There's a song that plays on the Christian radio stations by Matthew West called "Hello, my name is ..." The song talks about all the different names we give ourselves, and how they try to keep us from following Christ, because we're not worthy. I want to read to you the story behind that song as Matthew West tells it.

"Hello, my name is Jordan and I am a drug addict." That was the first sentence of this young man's story that he sent to me. He went on to tell me how for years that was how he identified himself. A two sport all star athlete in high school, Jordan received a college scholarship to

run track and play football at a university in Kentucky. But during his sophomore season, Jordan broke his ankle. That is when he received his first prescription to Oxycontin. He wrote about how addiction quickly took a hold of his life and sent him spinning out of control. After two failed drug tests, the university kicked him out and removed his sports scholarships. Jordan had lost everything he had worked for. He landed at a place called Teen Challenge in North Carolina. Teen Challenge is a Christian rehabilitation center in the business of restoring lives with the hope of Jesus Christ.

Jordan said it was during his time in Teen Challenge that he began to realize that God wasn't done with him yet, and that all of those defeating titles like "addict," didn't have to be attached to his name the rest of his life. His story is far from over. He told me that in the years since his recovery, he went back and got his master's degree from the very college that kicked him out. Now, he is a teacher and a coach and a newlywed. And he has recently felt God calling him into full time ministry.

He closed his story by saying, "These days I introduce myself a little differently than I used to. Hello, my name is Jordan and I am a child of the one true king!"

What a powerful example of God at work in someone's story. I read Jordan's story and couldn't help but wonder how many people in the world are walking around defined by the defeat and the regret of past mistakes, believing the lie that they will never be able to kick an old habit or move on from yesterday's mistakes. Jordan's story is powerful proof that we are not defined by our past. God can restore, redeem, and renew our hearts and lives. He can set our feet on a new path that will lead our lives to a destination far greater than where we used to call home.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is gone and the new has come!” Jordan is standing in the light of a new beginning, forgetting what is behind and taking hold of his new name.

Paul could have easily given up and stayed defined by the names that were given to him, but he chose to hold on to the name that Christ gave him. He was a child of the One True King, too; and he used that to spread the Gospel beyond the Jewish roots to the gentiles. He shined the light of Christ for all to see.

Romans 16:25-27 (Closing)

²⁵ Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ²⁶ but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Questions

1. What are some of the “names” that have been associated with or assigned to you in the past?
2. How has the mystery that Paul talks about in Colossians 1:26, 27 been revealed to you?
3. How can we be like Paul in the first five verses of Colossians 2, encouraging others with our struggles?