**THEME FOR THE YEAR - THE BIBLE: HOPE FOR ALL**

Sermon theme: The great mystery

Scripture reading: Ephesians 6:14-20 and Colossians 4:2-5

Objective/Summary: Pray that God will open a door for/of the Word so that we will be able to proclaim the mystery of Christ.

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Sermon outline

In Afrikaans, there is an adage that says that one can literally walk straight into and be obstructed by a closed door. Figuratively, this means that you bump up against something and cannot proceed any further.

Paul uses the picture of a closed door to express something of the helplessness that he feels. While he was writing this letter, he was taken prisoner and thrown into prison as a result of the gospel of Jesus Christ that he proclaimed. He was trapped in a cell with a closed door that prevented him from leaving and continuing with his work. He used this image of a closed door to say something about the great and virtually impossible challenge of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was like the closed door of the prison cell that he was unable to open. He was powerless. He could kick, hit and push the closed door, he could scream and shout, but it did not help at all. He could not open the door. The door could only be opened if someone from outside, unlocked the door and opened it.

In the Bible, this image of a door is often used to demonstrate man’s efforts to get to God. In John 10:9, Jesus said that he is the door through which people could come to God. In the parable of the 10 virgins (Matthew 25:11) with their lamps, we are told about the five foolish virgins who stood outside the closed door shouting, but the door would not open. In Acts, we read about the three miraculous instances (Acts 5:23; 12:6-7; 16:26) when God opened the prison doors for the apostles.

The imagery of our text indicates that it is only God who can open the door so that the mystery of the Word can be proclaimed. If the door is closed, the proclamation cannot take place. The text can be translated in two ways. That God will open the door *of* or *for* the Word so that Paul could proclaim the mystery of the Word. This great mystery of the Word cannot be unlocked and opened by a human being. This can only happen if God opens the door of the Word himself so that the minister can understand some of the mystery and can proclaim it. Paul realises that he cannot penetrate the mystery of the Word himself. Only God can reveal it or make it known.

At that time, there was the delusion of the Gnostics that was also an effort to know and understand the mystery of the God. According to them, humanity could be elevated to God through secret knowledge that one could master through the use of certain words. Some Jewish scholars regarded knowledge of the Law as a secret key that could unlock the door to God. Paul emphatically stated that human knowledge and wisdom were not capable of opening the door to God, it was only God himself that could open the door in order that He could be proclaim the mystery of the Word. The key to open the door is prayer. The door can only be opened through the

prayer of believers. Through the prayers of the believers, God will open the door of His Word through the Holy Spirit so that the mystery of Christ can be proclaimed. In Ephesians 6:19 it is expressly stated, “… and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel.”

One possible translation is thus that God, who grants access to the mystery of the Word, will open the door so that the minister can proclaim the meaning of the mystery. The other possible translation (epigenetic genitive) is that God will open the door for the Word as in the English Standard Version above. This means that God will open the door on the side of the people who hear God’s word, so that they will hear and understand the mystery of the Word. He thus asked that the congregation would pray for the receptivity of the Word among the people. It is only God, who through the Holy Spirit, can open the door of people’s hearts so that they are able to hear and believe the mystery of the Word. Much is said in our time of the so-called open door of the gospel that must be proclaimed. Only God can open the door for the Word so that people can hear it and believe.

Pray that God will open the door for, or of, the Word in order that He can proclaim the mystery of the Word. This is Paul’s request to the believers. He (Paul) alone does not have the ability to open the door of or for the Word of God. Only God can do that. The door, like a prison cell, can only be opened from outside. Only God, through the Holy Spirit, can make this possible. Naturally, he as a minister, needs to pray that God will do it, but the whole congregation, with him, needs to knock, call out and pray that God will open the door so that the mystery of his Word can be proclaimed.

What does he (Paul) mean by the mystery that he must proclaim? The Greek word that is translated as mystery, appears 27 times in the New Testament and 20 of the 27 times, it was Paul that used the word in his letters. This shows that word “mystery” is a very important key concept when he talks about the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a great difference between a puzzle and a mystery. A puzzle can be solved if you really think about and study it. A puzzle has an answer if you dig deeply enough. You, however, cannot discover [the solution to] a secret. You only find out about a secret when someone tells you about it and what it means. Paul emphasises that the mystery he is talking about is a godly one. This godly mystery can just be unravelled when God makes it known and reveals it. This revelation of this godly mystery took place through the Christmas events.

Today, in this sermon, I would like to emphasise the necessity of prayer as the only key that can open the door of God’s Word. High demands are placed on a minister to be able to preach today. To be allowed to preach requires study in order to equip someone for this great task. Knowledge of the source texts of the Bible is but one of the many prerequisites to be able to understand and convey the Bible text correctly. All the knowledge is, however, not a guarantee that the minister would be able to open this door of the Word. Paul, in that time, was someone with thorough training and knowledge to be able to act as a teacher. He had studied under the tutelage of the well-known rabbi, Gamaliel. Paul, however, discovered that his knowledge and background were not enough to unlock the mystery of the Word. It is only God himself who can reveal the mystery of the Word to people. The only key that there is to unlock this mystery is prayer. His own personal prayer that God would open the door for him was obviously necessary, but he requested and implored the congregation to pray with him that God would open the door of and for the Word. It was as though he asked the entire congregation of believers to pray with him, knock at the door, call out to God and ask him to unlock the door.

The preparation of a sermon requires thorough preparation, study, research, reflection, reading up other theologians’ understanding of the text, everything as a part of an effort to open the Word of God and discover the mystery of Christ. Through the minister’s sermon, he/she can try to impress the congregation with knowledge and learning. The people, as a result, can hang on the words of the minister on account of his transmission or presentation, but this is all not a guarantee that he/she would truly proclaim the mystery of Christ. To do that, more than hours of study and preparation are necessary. It all begins with the minister’s prayer that God will open the door of the Word. It is an ongoing prayer and expectation that the door will be opened. The prayer before the worship service is also intercession that God will open the door. It is also the prayer that God, on the side of the congregation, will open their hearts, thoughts and lives for the Word so that they can begin to grasp what the meaning of the mystery of Christ is for their lives.

Today, with Paul, I would like to plead with you to pray with me that God will open the door of his Word so that we may understand, make sense of, experience, discover something of the great mystery of Christ, “… pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ … ”