

## 8. The mystery, the ministry, and me

November 4, 2012

Though the Word of God itself is inspired by the Holy Spirit, but the chapter breaks were not. For that reason, from time to time we find rather awkward chapter breaks throughout the Bible. Here is a case in point between Ephesians 2 and 3, because the thoughts in these chapters are so closely connected.

Apostle Paul explained to us his excitement about Jesus Christ's work of reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles; between God and human. But he knew better not to assume that every one of us completely understood it. So in chapter 3, he reiterates to us from a little different angle to make sure that we get a firm grip on it.

There is one word that keeps on popping up in this chapter, as well as, in the entire Book – the word "mystery". It is mentioned 6 times in this Book, and 3 of them are found in this chapter 3.

If you google the word "mystery," 506 million results pop up. The most of them have to do with 'mystery fiction.' The common definition of English word 'mystery' gives a lot different nuances than the original word's definition. When we hear the word 'mystery,' the majority of us would think about eerie, suspense, or some weird feeling we cannot describe quite clearly, as if you are about to walk into the Twilight Zone.

But according to the famous Merriam-Webster Dictionary, it defines the word 'mystery' as "a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand". Good examples would be like "Trinity, Nativity, the Crucifixion, or the Assumption." It is also defined as: "something not understood or beyond understanding"– enigma. But in the New Testament, a mystery is a "sacred secret" that is unknown to unbelievers, but understood and treasured by the people of God.

Paul explains the mystery – the Gentile believers are now united to the Jewish believers in one body, the church. He also elaborates the tremendous impact of this "sacred secret" that had so possessed his own life, his ministry and us. Thus, today's title is "The Mystery, the ministry, and me."

### A. PAUL, THE PRISONER OF CHRIST

*Ephesians 3:1 For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles--*

If we had an impeccable resume like apostle Paul, we would be tempted to hint to the listeners how important or how influential we are. There is nothing like that about Paul.

Over ten years ago, I was organizing a pastors and leaders conference while I was still working part time as a graphic designer/assistant pastor at Calvary Tucson. One of the speakers of the conference found out the incorrect numbers of the radio stations that carried his Bible teaching programs around the country. He called me late night and was very upset with me and told me that I should reprint the entire brochures that would cost over \$2000 with the correct numbers of the radio stations. While he was ranting and raving about the dumb stupid thing, I was really tempted to tell him, "Nobody cares about how many stations carry your program except your own stinky pride."

Here apostle Paul noted his prisoner status and then drew his readers' attention to the most important place: God's grace. In other words, he was not ashamed of being a prison inmate for the sake of Christ.

Many Christians would rather keep silent about their faith in Christ Jesus for the sake of popularity and acceptance by the unbelievers around them than speaking the truth as the Holy Spirit leads them. But we should be like apostle Paul.

## **B. THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY**

*Ephesians 3:2-6 if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, 3 how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel,*

I know that y'all use this fancy dancy word 'dispensation' everyday, but I don't. In my opinion, NKJV and KJV are doing a disservice to the readers by using this complicated word.

The Greek word for 'dispensation' is "oikonomia." This word comes from two Greek words: "oikos," meaning "house"; and "nomos," meaning "law." Our English word "economy" is derived directly from the Greek "oikonomia" – "the law of the house," or "a stewardship, a management, oversight, administration, of other's property."

What Paul is saying is that God entrusted him with the message of His grace, which he was to make known to the Gentiles. Then, how did Paul come to know of God's plan? The Lord Jesus gave the revelation of the mystery of God's grace through Jesus' death and resurrection by the illumination of the Holy Spirit to Paul.

In English a "mystery" is something dark, obscure, secret, or puzzling as I mentioned. But the Greek word "mysterion" is different. Although still a "secret," it is no longer closely guarded but open. The Christian "mysteries" are truths which, although beyond human discovery, have been revealed by God and so now belong openly to the whole church.

What was the mystery about? It was the "mystery of Jesus the Messiah, into which Paul and the other apostles and prophets were given insight from God. Previous generations had been told of a coming Messiah, but they had assumed He would be a Messiah for the Jews only. Another mind-boggling surprise was, much to their Jewish dismay, the mystery of God's grace unfold as a Jew-Gentile union. Human birth may bring racial distinctions, but supernatural birth erases them. What a wonderful grace of God!

## **C. THE DECLARATION OF THE MYSTERY**

*Ephesians 3:7-8 of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. 8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,*

"The mystery" not only gives believing Gentiles a new relationship with God, it also reveals that there is a new power available to them. This power is illustrated in the

life of Paul. God saved him by grace and gave him a stewardship, a special ministry to the Gentiles. But God also gave Paul the power to accomplish this ministry. The word 'working' here is "energeia" from which we get our word "energy." Like Energy Drink "Monster" which I give to my two years old grandson Micah everyday. I haven't figured out why he is so hyper.

The power behind Paul's ministry was not his knowledge of the OT Scripture or the knowledge of the Talmud, rather it is the same power that raised Christ from the dead. It is the power that pulled Paul out from the darkness of spiritual death into the life-giving light of Christ.

Even though the Lord wiped away all of Paul's sins, the apostle still remembers his past persecution against the Christians in Israel and the surrounding areas.

*1 Corinthians 15:9-10 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

Please note what he said in this v10. Was he looking for cheap pity or to exaggerate his humility? No, though his sins were horrible, but the grace of God was much more abundant for him and he wants the Ephesian believers and us to know about it.

The unsearchable riches of Christ is available to every believer. What are these riches? They are salvation in Christ, knowing who God is, being admitted to the family of God, privilege of being the joint-heirs with Christ, and much more.

#### **D. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE MYSTERY**

*Ephesians 3:9-10 and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; 10 to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places,*

Just as Paul was entrusted with the "administration of God's grace" in v2, so the church is entrusted with accepting and continuing our unity in Christ. This was one of the messages Paul was to bring to light. God's whole purpose in Paul's preaching, teaching, and praying ministry is that the church should become the display of God's rich wisdom to the unbelieving world as well as the angels.

In the NT, when the phrase "the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" comes across, we know that the Scripture is describing the demonic angels. But not in this case. These principalities and powers in the heavenly places are both good and bad angels according to context.

Let's stop here for a short time to talk about 'angels'. The word 'angel' actually comes from the Greek word "aggelos," which means "messenger." The matching Hebrew word "mal'ak" has the same meaning. They should not be worshiped by us. Because they are fellow workers for the Lord.

Have you ever wondered when the angels were created by God? Were they existing with God from the beginning? Absolutely not.

*Genesis 1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*

The time of the creation of angels is never definitely specified, but it is most probable that it occurred in connection with the creation of the heavens in Genesis 1:1. It may be that God created the angels immediately after He had created the heavens and before He created the earth.

*Job 38:6-7 To what were its foundations fastened? Or who laid its cornerstone, 7 When the morning stars sang together, And all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

## **E. ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THE MINISTER TO ME**

*Ephesians 3:11-13 according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him. 13 Therefore I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.*

Though apostle Paul was bound on shackles, he was more free than anyone could imagine, because he understood freedom through Jesus Christ.

When God saved Paul, He deposited with him the precious treasures of Gospel truth. Paul in turn committed these truths to others, exhorting them to commit the truths to faithful men who would guard them and share them.

Before Adam and Eve, before the animals, before the plants, even before there was light, God planned to bring about salvation and unity through Christ. The Father planned it, the Son implemented it, and the Spirit empowered it. The Triune God planned from the beginning of time to proclaim this message through Christ's church.

When you have a chance, you need to check out the Christian church history. As these apostles and other believers scattered around the world and started to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ, the church became strong against the persecution of Satan and became a bright beacon of this dark world. So, in his cunning, Satan joined the church, if you will. Thus, many of the great truths of the Word were buried under man-made theology, tradition, and ritual until the 15th Century.

Then, God's Spirit began to open the eyes of seeking souls, and these great truths were unveiled again. Martin Luther championed justification by faith. Other spiritual leaders rediscovered the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the glorious truth of the return of Jesus Christ, and the joy of the victorious Christian life. In last half century, the truth of "the mystery" has again excited the hearts of God's people in spite of a great deal of apathy amongst Christians and pseudo-Christians. We can be encouraged and rejoice that we are in Christ Jesus and His unsearchable riches.

## **F. CONCLUSION**

**By grace, Paul made known God's grace to the Gentiles; by grace, Christ made Jew and Gentile one in His church; and by grace, we, Christ's church, proclaim the riches of God's grace to each new generation.**