

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS

THE MYSTERY OF THE CHURCH

Read Ephesians 3:1-9

Introduction

During his Roman imprisonment Paul was under house arrest. In the day he was free to move around the house with the supervision of soldiers, but every night he was chained to a soldier to make sure he did not escape before his trial before Caesar. Yet he saw himself as the prisoner of Jesus Christ. He knew that Jesus was the Lord of his life, not the Roman government, so if he was a prisoner, he was Jesus' prisoner.

Why did Paul use the phrase "for you Gentiles"? Paul refers back ("for this reason") to what he has just said in Ephesians 2:11-22, that God has broken down the barrier between the Jews and Gentiles, making Gentile Christians one with God's people, full citizens of the Kingdom of God. The entire reason he was under arrest and awaiting trial was because of his missionary efforts on behalf of the Gentiles.

Revelation of the Mystery to Paul

"... if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)" (vv2-4)

One obvious keyword in this passage is "mystery." What does it mean? What did it mean to Paul and the recipients of this letter? We see the Greek word "mystērion" in Ephesians 1:9; 3:3-4, 9; 5:32; and 6:19. "Mystery" in Paul's writings is not a puzzle to be solved by detectives studying the clues, such as in a mystery novel. Among the abundant Greco-Roman mystery religions it meant a secret rite or teaching that only the initiated could know. But Paul uses it quite differently, as "the unmanifested or private counsel of God, (God's) secret," which are hidden from human reason and ingenuity, and can only be known by revelation. Paul is talking about a secret, hidden for the ages and only now ready to be revealed.

Before we get into the text, let's consider another word that is used twice in our passage, in verses 2 and 9. Its translation can disguise the fact that it is the same word: administration (NIV), dispensation (KJV), stewardship, plan (NRSV), commission, plan (NASB). The basic meaning of "oikonomia" (from which we get our word "economy") is "responsibility of management, management of a household, work of an estate manager," then more generally, "direction, office." Paul applies the idea of administration to the office of an apostle, "You have heard about the administration of grace that was given to me for you...."

Reading from the Amplified Version, it reads:

*"... assuming that you have **heard of the stewardship of God's grace** that was entrusted to me [to share with you] for your benefit; and that by [divine] revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I have already written in brief." (vv2-3)*

Paul tells us that he has been particularly chosen for this mission of revealing God's hidden secret. He makes it a point that it isn't his idea or his discovery or something he figured out, but that "by [divine] revelation the mystery was made known to me" (Ephesians 3:3), that is, that God revealed it to him.

Revelation to Apostles and Prophets

"... 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" (v5)

The means of this revelation is "by the Spirit". Christianity is not a religion that men figured out or inferred. It comes to us by revelation, that is, God revealed it directly to us through inspired writers of Scripture -- "holy apostles and prophets." The Gospels are Jesus' words and actions conveyed to us by apostolic teaching -- that is, from the message and with the authority of Christ's appointed apostles. The New Testament epistles are Scripture because they are the teaching of the apostles, who were given by Christ the specific task of establishing the church. Scripture is a product of the Holy Spirit's revelation through apostles and prophets. Paul wrote to Timothy:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

This quality of being "God-breathed" (NIV), "inspired" (NRSV, NASB), "breathed out by God" (ESV), or "given by inspiration" (KJV) is what makes Scripture authoritative for us in all matters of faith and practice.

What Is the Mystery?

“... that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (v6)

The mystery is this: Gentiles are equally the people of God with God's chosen people, the Jews. That may not be a revelation to you, but it certainly was an eye-opener to the early Jewish believers -- and to the Gentile believers, who were sometimes made to feel like second-class citizens around Jewish Christians.

The Gentiles are described in relationship to Israel with three compound words, starting with the preposition syn-, "together with."

- "Heirs together" (sygklēronomos), "inheriting together with, co-heir."
- "Members together of one body" (syssōmos), "belonging to the same body," used only here in the New Testament.
- "Sharers together" (symmetoxos), "having a share with another in some possession or relationship, sharing with," here and in Ephesians 5:7.

Lest we Gentiles get big-headed, in Romans 9-11 Paul makes the point that we are not to look with enmity on the Jews, even the unbelieving Jews.

"For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." (Romans 11:25).

The Unsearchable Riches of Christ

“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 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” (vv8-9)

Meditate for a moment on the phrase "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (verse 8).

"Unsearchable" (NIV, KJV) or "boundless" (NRSV) means "inscrutable, incomprehensible, fathomless". Paul puts it this way in Romans 11:33

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!”

Christ's revelation is beyond what we can fully understand, but it is also rich. "Riches" here has the basic meaning, "abundance of many earthly goods, wealth." Applied to Christ it means "a wealth, abundance." Paul mentions Christ's riches often. If we have no concept of Christ's riches, we don't desire them or him. But Paul had caught a glimpse of a different kind of riches than worldly wealth, was captivated by it, and bids us come to explore Christ's riches for ourselves.

What are these riches?

The Greek for "unsearchable riches" is translated "boundless riches" in the NIV. The Greek word translated "unsearchable" describes something that cannot be fully comprehended or explored. In other words, there is no limit to the riches of Christ; they are past finding out. Try as we might, we can never plumb the depths of Christ's worth. Paul delineates some of these riches in Ephesians 1:7–14: redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, the knowledge of the mystery of His will, the message of truth, the sealing of the Holy Spirit, and the guarantee of our inheritance. These are spiritual riches with eternal benefits, and we cannot fully comprehend them.

Jesus taught two short parables that emphasize the value of these riches, eternal life, and the kingdom of God: "*Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went, and sold all that he had and bought it.*" (**Matthew 13:44–46**). Like a hidden treasure or a pearl of great price, admission to the kingdom is of incalculable worth—and it is Jesus Christ who grants the admission. The unsearchable riches of Christ are on display in every believer's heart.

The unsearchable riches of Christ cannot be fully traced out. "*For in Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily*" (**Colossians 2:9**), so the riches of Christ include all that God is. The unsearchable riches of Christ are the Glory of God, the Truth of God, the Wisdom of God, the Life of God, and the Love of God. In Christ, God "*has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*" (**Ephesians 1:3**). In Christ are hidden "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (**Colossians 2:3**). In Christ, God "*has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness*" (**2 Peter 1:3**).

King Solomon was a man of great riches and wisdom, and his fame spread throughout the known world. Dignitaries from other countries came to hear his wisdom and see his lavish display of wealth (**1 Kings 10:24**). Scripture says that Solomon had no equal in the earth at that time: "King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth" (verse 23). Yet, for all that, Solomon's riches were not unsearchable. They could be quantified; the gold bars could be counted, and he had no inexhaustible supply of silver. Besides that, Solomon's riches were only the temporal treasures of this world. Jesus is "greater than Solomon" (**Luke 11:31**). The treasures of Christ are inexhaustible, they are unsearchable, and they are forever.

