

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON THIRTY)

“UNSEARCHABLE RICHES”

EPHESIANS 3

1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

3 How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,

4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:

12 In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.

13 Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;

17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,

18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;

19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

20 Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us,

21 Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

It has been observed that in the epistle to the Ephesians, we enter the Holy of Holies in Paul's writings. The epistle has been called "the greatest revelation of truth that God has given to us."

In this epistle, Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, unveils the great mystery of the Church. The Church is the Body of Christ, and believers, who have been saved by the grace of God, are members of that Body of which Christ is the head.

In chapters **1-3**, Paul, outlines the believers' **position** in Christ and the **resources** that are made available to them because of their position. In chapters **4-6**, He outlines the believers' walk, in light of all the resources that have been made available to them, as a result of their position in Christ.

In our attempt to explore this great masterpiece, we have concluded our examination of the first two chapters. In this **Lesson**, we will begin our study of chapter **three**.

Having discussed in chapter **two**, the union of the Gentile and the Jewish believers in the church, Paul started to offer a prayer on behalf of these believers at the beginning of chapter **three**. But he stops, in verse **1**, at the very beginning of his prayer, and digresses to speak about the subject of "*the mystery of Christ*." From verses **2-13**, he explains this mystery and the responsibility that God had given him to preach and teach it, particularly to the Gentiles. Then, in verse **14**, he resumes his prayer and concludes in verse **21**.

The words "*For this cause*," at the beginning of verse **1**, refer back specifically to verses **11-22** of the previous chapter. In these verses Paul had explained that the Jewish and the Gentile believers had been raised

together to a new plane. But the phrase probably refers also, in a more general way to all that he had written in chapters **one** and **two**, about the amazing grace of God.

Paul refers to himself in verse **1** as, “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ.*” It is very likely that the believers in Ephesus, were wondering why he was a prisoner in Rome, and why God would permit such a thing to happen to His Apostle. The words “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ,*” are in a construction in the Greek which implies that it was Jesus Christ Himself who had made Paul a prisoner.

When Paul wrote this letter, he was awaiting trial before the tyrannical Roman Emperor, Nero, and he was aware of the fact that there was a strong possibility that he would ultimately suffer martyrdom. But we are unable to detect even one note of complaint in this letter concerning his imprisonment. In fact, Paul did not consider himself to be a prisoner of the Roman empire, but the prisoner of Christ! To all outward appearances, Paul was a prisoner of the Roman government, but that is not the way he looked at it, at all. In every reference to himself as a prisoner, Paul emphasizes the fact that as a prisoner, he belongs to Jesus Christ. He was imprisoned because he was engaged in the service of Jesus Christ and it was for Christ’s sake that he was being persecuted. Thus, he considered his imprisonment to be a very honourable one.

Paul was assured that all the details of his imprisonment, including the outcome, whether it was to be a death-sentence or an acquittal, were in the hands of the One who controlled the entire universe in the interest of the Church. These same hands had been pierced for Paul, and he was engraved in the palms of these very hands!

When we read his letter to the Philippians, we are made aware of Paul’s pressing concern as it related to his imprisonment. In **Philippians 1:20-21** he writes, “*My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted*

in my body, whether I live or die. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (New English Translation).

It was the intense desire of Paul’s heart that Christ should be exalted in him, whether by a life lived in the fullness of the Holy Spirit or in a martyr’s death.

He describes himself as “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles.*” He was a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles. What does he mean by that?

Paul was an Apostle, primarily to the Gentiles. In fact, in **Romans 11:13**, he refers to himself as “*the apostle of the Gentiles.*” In **Galatians 2:1-10**, he describes how his apostolic calling had been acknowledged and officially approved by James, John and Peter:

1 Then after fourteen years I went up to Jerusalem again with Barnabas, taking Titus along too.

2 I went there because of a revelation and presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. But I did so only in a private meeting with the influential people, to make sure that I was not running—or had not run—in vain.

3 Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, although he was a Greek.

4 Now this matter arose because of the false brothers with false pretenses who slipped in unnoticed to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, to make us slaves.

5 But we did not surrender to them even for a moment, in order that the truth of the gospel would remain with you.

6 But from those who were influential (whatever they were makes no difference to me; God shows no favoritism between people)—those influential leaders added nothing to my message.

7 On the contrary, when they saw that I was entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised just as Peter was entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised

*8 (for he who empowered Peter for his apostleship to the circumcised also empowered me for my apostleship **to the Gentiles**)*

*10 and when James, Cephas, and John, who had a reputation as pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we would go **to the Gentiles** and they to the circumcised.*

10 They requested only that we remember the poor, the very thing I also was eager to do.

(New English Translation)

It is very important for us to understand however, that it was not James, John, or Peter who had called Paul to be an Apostle, neither had they given him his apostolic commission. They had only given ecclesiastical recognition to what was a sovereign decision of God. Paul makes this very clear in the introduction of his letter to the **Galatians**. In the very first verse of the letter he writes, *“From Paul, an apostle (not from men, nor by human agency, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.)”*

It was Jesus Christ himself who had called and commissioned him. The details are given to us in **Acts** chapter **9**. After Paul’s initial encounter with the Lord on the Damascus road, the Lord appeared in a vision to Ananias, a disciple of Damascus and instructed him to go to Paul, and lay his hands upon him, in order that his sight would be restored and that he would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ananias, knowing of Paul’s reputation as a fierce persecutor of the Church, initially protested. But in verses **15-16**, the Lord said to him, *“Go, because this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name **before Gentiles and kings and the people***

of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (New English Translation).

Paul was a leader in the religion of the Jews when Christ saved him and yet, in the providence of God, he began his early ministry in a local church in Antioch that was composed of both Jews and Gentiles. When the council was held at Jerusalem to determine the status of believing Gentiles, Paul courageously defended the grace of God and the unity of the Church.

In **Acts 21**, we find Paul in Jerusalem. He had gone there in order to celebrate the festival of Pentecost and to hand over the special offering he had received from the Gentile churches, for the poor saints in Judea. He delivered the offering in person, and from all evidence, it was graciously received by the Judean Christians. Verses **17-36**, inform us of how he literally became a prisoner of Jesus Christ for the sake of the Gentile believers.

17 When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us gladly.

18 The next day Paul went in with us to see James, and all the elders were there.

19 When Paul had greeted them, he began to explain in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

20 When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all ardent observers of the law.

21 They have been informed about you—that you teach all the Jews now living among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.

22 What then should we do? They will no doubt hear that you have come.

23 So do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow;

24 take them and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself live in conformity with the law.

25 But regarding the Gentiles who have believed, we have written a letter, having decided that they should avoid meat that has been sacrificed to idols and blood and what has been strangled and sexual immorality.”

26 Then Paul took the men the next day, and after he had purified himself along with them, he went to the temple and gave notice of the completion of the days of purification, when the sacrifice would be offered for each of them.

27 When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from the province of Asia who had seen him in the temple area stirred up the whole crowd and seized him,

28 shouting, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this sanctuary! Furthermore he has brought Greeks into the inner courts of the temple and made this holy place ritually unclean!”

29 (For they had seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him previously, and they assumed Paul had brought him into the inner temple courts.)

30 The whole city was stirred up, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple courts, and immediately the doors were shut.

31 While they were trying to kill him, a report was sent up to the commanding officer of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions and ran down to the crowd. When they saw the commanding officer and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

33 Then the commanding officer came up and arrested him and ordered him to be tied up with two chains; he then asked who he was and what he had done.

34 But some in the crowd shouted one thing, and others something else, and when the commanding officer was unable to find out the truth because of the disturbance, he ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks.

35 When he came to the steps, Paul had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob,

36 for a crowd of people followed them, screaming, "Away with him!"
(New English Translation)

Brothers and sisters, Paul was indeed a prisoner in behalf of the Gentiles. It was because of his standing up for the truth that the Gentiles should be accepted into the Church, without having to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses, and his willingness to contend for their liberty in Christ Jesus, that caused the intense hatred of him among the Jews. It was his friendship for Trophimus, a Gentile believer from Ephesus, which resulted in false charges being brought against him in the temple, that first brought him into the power of the Roman government.

In a very real sense, every Gentile who has ever been saved, including all of us, is indebted to Paul for the salvation which we have received in Christ. From a strictly human stand-point, we may argue that had it not been for the Apostle Paul, there would have been no world-wide Christianity, and that we would not be regarded as Christians today.

All of Paul's persecutions, from the first to the last, were part and parcel of his mission to the Gentiles. Had he compromised his message and encouraged the selfish prejudices of the Jews he would have spared himself a great deal of persecution and imprisonment.

Listen to what he writes in **Galatians 6:12-14**:

12 Those who want to make a good showing in external matters are trying to force you to be circumcised. They do so only to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ.

13 For those who are circumcised do not obey the law themselves, but they want you to be circumcised so that they can boast about your flesh.

14 But may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

(New English Translation)

Having broken off in the middle of a sentence in verse **1**, Paul began one new long sentence that ended in verse **13**. In this long sentence, Paul wrote of the administration of God's grace that was given to him and concluded by asking the Ephesian believers not to be discouraged over his imprisonment in Rome. In the sentence he explains one of the greatest truths in this letter, the "mystery" of the church.

In verse **2**, he says that a "dispensation of the grace of God" had been given to him in respect of the Gentiles. The word "dispensation" is a translation of the Greek word **oikonomia**, (**oy-kon-om-ee'-ah**). This word is itself made up of two words, **oikos**, meaning "a house," and

nomos, meaning “law.” The word therefore means, “the law of the house.” Our English word “economy” is derived directly from this Greek word. The word speaks in general of the oversight, stewardship, or administration that an individual has over something. Paul is claiming here that the Lord had given to him the responsibility of administering the grace of God to the Body of Christ and particularly to the Gentiles. He was given the revelation of the grace of God and the responsibility of properly preaching and teaching it.

God made Paul a steward of “*the mystery*” with the responsibility of sharing it with the Gentiles. It was not enough for him simply to win them to Christ and form them into local assemblies. He was also to teach them their wonderful position in Christ as members of the body, sharing God’s grace equally with the Jews.

In verse **3**, Paul explains that the extension of the grace of God to the Gentiles had previously been a mystery. The word “*mystery*” is the translation of the Greek word **musterion**, (**moos-tay’-ree-on**). In classical Greek, the word meant “a hidden thing, a secret, a mystery.” In the New Testament, it means “the secret purposes and counsels which God intends to carry into effect in His kingdom.” It is something which is not understood until it is revealed, but when it is revealed, those who are illuminated by the Holy Spirit are able to understand it.

The word “*mystery*” in the New Testament **does not** refer to something that can never be understood. But it **does** mean that it cannot be understood **without divine assistance**. It is a mystery in the sense that the human mind can never understand it as a result of its own efforts.

In verse **5**, Paul informs us of the time when the mystery was disclosed. He says, “*Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*”

The mystery had not been made known to persons in previous generations. God had now revealed it to the Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament era.

In verse **6**, Paul proceeds to make known the mystery. He writes, *“That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.”*

The revelation of the mystery is that the Gentile believers are now united to the Jewish believers in one body, the Church. The revelation was not that the Gentiles could be saved, for the Old Testament Scriptures gave evidence of that, but rather that, according to the sovereign purpose and plan of God, believing Jews and Gentiles are joined together in one body. This was a revolutionary concept for Jews and Gentiles alike!

In chapter **1** verse **10**, and chapter **2** verses **11-22**, Paul had mentioned this new work of God, so his readers were not entirely unfamiliar with the concept. But now Paul explains the tremendous impact of this *“mystery”* that had so affected his own life and ministry.

The Gentiles are *“fellow-heirs”* with the Jews. They are *“of the same body,”* and they are *“partakers of his promise.”* The Gentiles inherit jointly with the Jews all the blessings of salvation. They are fellow-members of the same body, the Mystical Body of Christ, which is a new creation, in which the line of separation between Jew and Gentile is broken down. They are fellow-partakers of the promises which are in Christ Jesus. Paul informs us that it is through the agency of the gospel that all of this has been effected.

Having described the mystery, Paul, in verse **7**, discusses his ministry of dispensing this mystery to the Gentiles. Speaking in reference to the gospel he writes, *“Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.”*

Paul was not only a “*prisoner*” because of “*the mystery*,” but he was also a “*minister*” because of it. God gave him a “*dispensation*” that he might go to the Gentiles, not only with the Good News of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but also with the message that Jews and Gentiles are now one in Christ.

The Greek word translated “*minister*” is **diakonos**, (**dee-ak’-on-os**) which refers to “one who executes the commands of another.” It speaks of a servant as seen in his activity. Our word “*deacon*” comes from this Greek word. It is important for us to understand that Paul does not use the word “*minister*” in its current technical meaning, designating the Pastor of a church. Paul merely meant that he became one who ministered the gospel, serving God in that capacity.

Paul says he was made a minister “*according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.*” Paul’s service had its basis in the gift of God’s grace given to him through the working of God’s power. God saved him by His grace and gave him a stewardship, a special ministry to the Gentiles. But God also gave Paul the power to accomplish this ministry. It was Paul’s responsibility to minister this grace by God’s strength, not his own.

Paul was acutely aware of this. In **1 Corinthians 15:10** he wrote. “*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been in vain. In fact, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God with me.*”

It was the power of God that had transformed Saul the persecutor into Paul the apostle to the Gentiles. When Paul considered the immensity of the grace of God that had been demonstrated towards him, not only in salvation, but in respect of his being chosen to be the Apostle to the Gentiles and an administrator of the grace of God, a sense of his own unworthiness overwhelmed him. Perhaps there were tears in his eyes as

he wrote in verse **8**, *“Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.”*

The words *“less than the least”* are the translation of a Greek word which literally means “more least.” Paul’s estimation of himself was that he was “more least” than even the least of the saints. In Paul’s theology, the word *“saints”* means any true believer. Thus, for Paul to view himself as *“less than the least of all the saints”* is to view himself as the most unworthy object of Christ’s redemption. This denotes Paul’s deep humility in view of God’s incomparably generous grace bestowed upon him. Brothers and sisters, grace does not cause us to have big heads: grace causes us to have broken and contrite hearts.

Paul’s Four Self-Assessments

1 1 Corinthians 15:9

*“For I am **the least of the apostles**, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”*

2 Romans 7:18

“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.”

New English Translation

*“For I know that **nothing good lives in me**, that is, in my flesh. For I want to do the good, but I cannot do it.”*

3 Ephesians 3:8

*“Unto me, who am **less than the least of all saints**, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.”*

4 1 Timothy 1:15

*This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save **sinners**; of whom I am chief.*

New English Translation

*“This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save **sinners**’—and I am the worst of them.”*

Paul says that the gift of God’s grace was given to him in order to enable him to “*preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*” The riches of Christ spoken of here are the riches that are in Christ Jesus which are the inheritance of the saints. The word “*unsearchable*” is a translation of a Greek word which means “that which cannot be traced out.” While it is possible for us to know now, something of the riches of Christ’s love and mercy and grace, the fathomless spiritual wealth that is ours in Christ, can never be fully comprehended. The riches contained in Christ is the whole wealth of the salvation which He bestows on the elect. Paul was given the responsibility to disclose publicly the “unsearchable riches of Christ” to everyone, particularly the Gentiles, but not even he could fully understand or appreciate them!

In his classic work “*Morning and Evening,*” **Charles Spurgeon** wrote a devotional, entitled, “*The unsearchable riches of Christ.*” I will read an extract of the same for our edification:

“My Master has riches beyond the count of arithmetic, the measurement of reason, the dream of imagination, or the eloquence of words. They are unsearchable! You may look, and study, and weigh, but Jesus is a greater Saviour than you think him to be when your thoughts are at the greatest.

My Lord is more ready to pardon than you to sin, more able to forgive than you to transgress.

My Master is more willing to supply your wants than you are to confess them.

Never tolerate low thoughts of my Lord Jesus. When you put the crown on his head, you will only crown him with silver when he deserves gold.

My Master has riches of happiness to bestow upon you now. He can make you to lie down in green pastures, and lead you beside still waters... There is no love like his, neither earth nor heaven can match it.

To know Christ and to be found in him-oh! this is life, this is joy, this is marrow and fatness, wine on the lees well refined.

My Master does not treat his servants churlishly; he gives to them as a king giveth to a king; he gives them two heavens-a heaven below in serving him here, and a heaven above in delighting in him forever. His unsearchable riches will be best known in eternity.

He will give you on the way to heaven all you need... but it is there, there, where you shall hear the song of them that triumph, the shout of them that feast, and shall have a face-to-face view of the glorious and beloved One.

The unsearchable riches of Christ! This is the tune for the minstrels of earth, and the song for the harpers of heaven. Lord, teach us more and more of Jesus, and we will tell out the good news to others.”

Fanny Crosby, the American poet and Hymnwriter wrote:

*“Oh, the unsearchable riches of Christ,
Wealth that can never be told!
Riches exhaustless of mercy and grace,
Precious, more precious than gold!*

*Oh, the unsearchable riches of Christ!
Who shall their greatness declare?
Jewels whose luster our lives may adorn,
Pearls that the poorest may wear!*

*Oh, the unsearchable riches of Christ!
Freely, how freely they flow,
Making the souls of the faithful and true
Happy wherever they go!*

*Oh, the unsearchable riches of Christ!
Who would not gladly endure
Trials, afflictions, and crosses on earth,
Riches like these to secure!*

*Precious, more precious,
Wealth that can never be told!
Oh, the unsearchable riches of Christ!
Precious, more precious than gold.”*