

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

(LESSON THIRTY-ONE)

“THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE MYSTERY”

EPHESIANS 3:1-11

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.

Last week, we commenced our examination of the third chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the believers in Ephesus.

Paul is a model of how to deal with doctrinal truths, because his proclamation of doctrine, almost always leads him to burst forth in prayer and praise unto God. This is exactly what happens in this instance. Paul's exposition of salvation in chapter 2 leads him to offer a prayer for his readers. The prayer starts in verse 1 of chapter 3, but he interrupts his prayer shortly after beginning, to speak about "*the mystery of Christ,*" and to give a description of his ministry from verses 1 through 13. He resumes his prayer in verse 14, and concludes in verse 21.

In describing his ministry, Paul refers to himself as, "*the prisoner of Jesus Christ.*" The words are in a construction in the Greek which implies that it was Jesus Christ Himself who had made Paul a prisoner. Paul did not consider himself to be a prisoner of the Roman Empire, but the prisoner of Christ! 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.

He describes himself as "*the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles.*" His imprisonment was for the sake of the Gentiles. This is an allusion to one of the reasons why he had endured so much suffering for Christ's

sake. Many first-century Jews found the gospel to be offensive because it proclaimed a Messiah who suffered the death of one who was cursed. In **Deuteronomy 21:22-23**, we read, “*And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged is accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.*”

But many of them were also offended that the gospel, as it was proclaimed by Paul, did not require the Gentiles to convert to Judaism in order to be reconciled to Yahweh, the covenant Lord of Israel. This led to false accusations that Paul despised the Law of God given to Moses, resulting in the arrest described in **Acts 21:17–36**, which we considered in our previous **Lesson**. In all likelihood, Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians during the imprisonment that followed that arrest.

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**), which means, “the law of the house.” 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.

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 mystery

had not been made known to persons in previous generations, but 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 now had an opportunity to be saved, for the Old Testament Scriptures gave evidence of that, but rather that, according to the sovereign purpose and plan of God, both believing Jews and Gentiles are joined together in one body, the Church. This was a revolutionary concept for Jews and Gentiles alike!

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 the Jews and the 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’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.

In verse **8** he writes, “*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 Pauline 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.

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 all 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.

In **verse 9**, he restates why the dispensation of the grace of God was given to him. He says, “*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.*”

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: “*and to enlighten everyone about God’s secret plan—the mystery that has been hidden for ages in God who has created all things.*”

Having been given the awesome responsibility of administering the grace of God to the Body of Christ, and particularly to the Gentiles, and having also received the gift of God’s grace, empowering him to accomplish this ministry, Paul’s passion was to make this gospel known to **all people**. He wanted everybody to see and share in the fellowship of this mystery, which had now been made known.

In **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**, Paul reveals the sacrifices he was willing to make in order to make the gospel known to all classes of people:

19 For since I am free from all I can make myself a slave to all, in order to gain even more people.

20 To the Jews I became like a Jew to gain the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) to gain those under the law.

21 To those free from the law I became like one free from the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under the law of Christ) to gain those free from the law.

22 To the weak I became weak in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I may save some.

23 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it.

(New English Translation)

Paul desired for the believers in Ephesus not only to know about “*the fellowship of the mystery*” but to participate in it also. The word “*Fellowship*” is the translation of the Greek word **oikonomia**, which was translated “*dispensation*” in verse 2. It was given to Paul to bring to light the way this mystery was administered, namely, the admission of the Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews. We should carefully consider what this phrase “*the fellowship of the mystery,*” means.

Brothers and sisters, we are not only dealing with a fact here. We also have to deal with our responsibility to live out the reality of this fact. I have been endeavouring to emphasize this to us in these studies, because I believe that it is vitally important for our development, not only as an assembly, but as members of the Body of Christ. Indeed, I believe that this is something that is far more important to God than many of the other things that churches spend a lot of time and money pursuing.

Listen to the woes pronounced by Jesus on the Jewish religious leaders of His day in **Matthew 23**, from the **New English Translation**:

Verses 1-7

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples,

2 “The experts in the law and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat.

3 Therefore pay attention to what they tell you and do it. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach.

4 They tie up heavy loads, hard to carry, and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing even to lift a finger to move them.

5 They do all their deeds to be seen by people, for they make their phylacteries wide and their tassels long.

6 They love the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues

7 and elaborate greetings in the marketplaces, and to have people call them ‘Rabbi.’

Verse 15-28

15 “Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You cross land and sea to make one convert, and when you get one, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves!

16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple is bound by nothing. But whoever swears by the gold of the temple is bound by the oath.’

17 Blind fools! Which is greater, the gold or the temple that makes the gold sacred?

18 And, ‘Whoever swears by the altar is bound by nothing. But if anyone swears by the gift on it he is bound by the oath.’

19 You are blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?

20 So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.

21 And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and the one who dwells in it.

22 And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and the one who sits on it.

23 “Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You give a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you neglect what is more important in the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness! You should have done these things without neglecting the others.

24 Blind guides! You strain out a gnat yet swallow a camel!

25 “Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may become clean too!

27 “Woe to you, experts in the law and you Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs that look beautiful on the outside but inside are full of the bones of the dead and of everything unclean.

28 In the same way, on the outside you look righteous to people, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

These Jewish religious leaders thought that they were doing so well. They were powerful, influential, respectable, committed, faithful and zealous for the things of God, including the conversion of the heathen to the truth. They were careful observers of all the requirements of the Mosaic Law and the rules and regulations that they had added to it. As far as external righteousness was concerned, they were blameless. And yet, Jesus’ perspective was so different. In His eyes they were fools, blind guides, and hypocrites!

Do you see beloved how possible it for us to major on minors and neglect the things that God sees as important? Do you see how we can allow ourselves to be deceived and/or deceive ourselves that we are doing well when in reality we are failing miserably?

Brothers and sisters, every believer is united with every other believer in Jesus Christ, without any separation such as existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. It is the responsibility of every member of the Body of Christ to demonstrate this unity by the way that we treat each other. The following Scripture passages, all reflecting the rendering of the **New English Translation**, clearly indicate this truth:

Romans 12:9-16

9 Love must be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good.

10 Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honoring one another.

11 Do not lag in zeal, be enthusiastic in spirit, serve the Lord.

12 Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer.

13 Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited.

Galatians 6:10

“So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who belong to the family of faith.”

Philippians 2:1-4

1 Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection or mercy,

2 complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose.

3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself.

4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but about the interests of others as well.

Colossians 3:12-14

“Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if someone happens to have a complaint against anyone else. Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also forgive others. And to all these virtues add love, which is the perfect bond.”

1 John 3:16-17

“We have come to know love by this: that Jesus laid down his life for us; thus we ought to lay down our lives for our fellow Christians. But whoever has the world’s possessions and sees his fellow Christian in need and shuts off his compassion against him, how can the love of God reside in such a person?”

I want to repeat here, something that I stated in **Lesson 29: “The Grace Workshop Ministries** should not primarily refer to a place where we gather for worship, but rather to a community of believers who are increasingly speaking and practicing the truth in love, learning to deal with the deepest divisions in a Christ-like manner, resolving conflicts by engaging in loving confrontation, fellowshiping our differences, exercising appropriate church discipline and demonstrating redemptive love. And the only way that these things can happen is if the gospel of the grace of God is preached, taught, understood, believed and applied to every area of our lives.”

In **John 13:34-35**, our Lord said to His disciples, *“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*

Bishop J.C. Ryle, commenting on these verses made the following remarks: “The immense importance of Christian love cannot possibly be shown more strikingly than the way that it is urged on the disciples in this place. Here is our Lord leaving the world, speaking for the last time, and giving His last charge to the disciples. The very first subject He

takes up and presses on them is the great duty of loving one another, and that with no common love; but after the same patient, tender, unwearied manner that He had loved them. Love must needs be a very rare and important grace to be so spoken of! The want of it must needs be plain proof that a man is no true disciple of Christ. How vast the extent of Christian love ought to be.”

The Law required that a man love his neighbour as himself. This was in the context of a fleshly relationship. Our Lord commands that we love our brothers and sisters in the context of a spiritual relationship. He says, *“By this shall all know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”* Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ is clearly indicating here, that the authenticating sign of discipleship is love. It is not knowledge; it is not miracles; it is not tongues; it is not baptism; it is not the observance of standards. None of the things that we have been accustomed to using as marks of true discipleship are mentioned here by our Lord. Is this not significant? What supremely identifies a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ is love-love for his or her fellow believers.

In **John 17:20-22**, our Lord prays to His Father in heaven and says, *“Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.”*

It is very important beloved ones, that we note that the unity of the believers with the Father and the Son is the witness to the world that Jesus was sent by the Father. The disciples are in the Father and the Son so *“that the world might believe.”* This kind of unity is far more profound than being united because we are members of the same assembly or organization. This is real oneness.

Brothers and sisters, the ultimate aim of such Christian unity is the glory of God. Let us therefore give very serious consideration to this matter of Christian unity and pray that God will help us to heed His Word and

apply our hearts unto wisdom. We must not be hearers of the Word only, but doers, lest the doom that awaits all false professors of faith as recorded in **Matthew 7:21-23**, be our portion: *“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”*

Brothers and sisters, let us ensure that we have not only made a profession of faith, but that we are also possessors of faith. One of the surest measurements that we can use to assure ourselves that we are indeed genuine Christians, is the unity and the love that is produced by that unity, among ourselves.