

Sermon – 08/06/2008 am

Mystery Made Known

Study Text: Ephesians 3:1-7

In writing this letter to the Ephesians, Paul has outlined the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. He reminded them that they were once dead in sin, but in Christ were made alive. Moreover, as Gentiles they were formerly outsiders, but now in Christ were brought inside the household of God. In Christ they had been reconciled with God and reconciled with the Jews. In Christ the two were made one, one new man from the two.

Paul began this letter with a glorious doxology. He went on to pray for these believers (1:16). He is about to continue in prayer but is suddenly reminded of his present circumstances. Did he hear the clink of the chains with which he was bound? *For this reason* he writes in 3:1 – and then look down to 3:14. *For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. He seems to pick up where he left off in 3:1. In the intervening verses he speaks of his calling by Jesus Christ to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Paul never forgot his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and he never tired of telling of the wonderful grace of God he received at that time.

Minister

Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this letter. He was a prisoner of Christ Jesus. What did he mean by this? Was he not a prisoner of the Romans – or of the Jews? It was the Jews who grabbed him and threw him out of the temple because they thought he had brought a Gentile into the prohibited area. Here was a Jew, a former Pharisee, being thrown out of the temple. He was arrested by the Romans and held for trial – that was over three years ago.

What humiliation, what injustice, what suffering this man went through, and continued in, for the sake of the gospel, the gospel that was for Gentile as well as Jew. In the grace of God he saw beyond this personal suffering. He saw the bigger picture of God's eternal purposes. He saw the hand of God in all that happened to him; so much so that he could say he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He was in prison by the will of God.

That is not to say he did not want to free. But he had learned to be content in whatever situation he was in (Philippians 4:11). His concern was to be a faithful minister or servant of the gospel, not for his own personal comfort or prosperity.

How do you respond to suffering or to injustice? How would you react if you were wrongly incarcerated? Would you get bitter and complain? Would you become stoical and depressed? In the grace of God, Paul could rejoice in his incarceration. He saw God's hand upon him and knew that God's will is good and perfect.

Sometimes God's hand is heavy upon us in discipline. God disciplines those he loves, just like any good father. Such discipline is not pleasant at the time (Hebrews 12:11). Sometimes we suffer that our faith might be strengthened. Even in the midst of suffering Paul could rejoice in the Lord. He could continue to minister the gospel to the Gentiles in Rome, and write letters to the churches.

Why was Paul in prison? Yes it was the will of God. But he also says it was *for you Gentiles* (3:1). At his conversion the Lord declared ‘you are my chosen vessel to bear my name to the Gentiles’ (Acts 9:15). Paul took this calling very seriously. It was a costly calling but he never doubted this calling. He was bound by the Lord as it were. He called himself a *bondservant/slave of Christ* (Galatians 1:10). God is his grace and power had made Paul a minister of the gospel, and he continued in that ministry every day and in every place by the grace and power of God.

Mystery of Christ

Thinking of the chains and of the reason he was in them took Paul back to the beginning of his new life as a disciple and indeed apostle of Jesus Christ. He thought Jesus was dead and was busy persecuting those who claimed he was alive. Such a claim was blasphemy in Paul’s view. But on that day Jesus appeared to him saying *Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me?*

This revelation entirely transformed his life. The fact that Jesus was alive meant he had risen from the dead. If Jesus had risen, as he said he would, then everything else he said must be true. As a Pharisee he had questioned and opposed everything Jesus said and did. Now he realised he was wrong. He realised that righteousness does not come by keeping the law but by faith in Jesus Christ.

This appearance of Jesus meant the mystery of God was made known to Paul. Paul was an expert in the law. He knew the Scriptures – or thought he did. Now he understood those same Scriptures in an entirely new light. The veil was lifted and the mystery revealed. Paul now saw how the Scriptures pointed to Christ. *The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17). This mystery was made known to Paul and he was making it known to the world, especially the Gentiles.

Paul was an apostle by the will of God (1:1). He was not appointed by any man or by the church, but by Jesus Christ (I Timothy 2:7). Surely you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you (3:2). The word *dispensation* is an interesting. It literally means ‘house manager’. Paul was the chief steward or administrator of the gospel for the Gentiles. He was not the inventor of a new religion or the leader of a new sect. He was a faithful steward handling the precious treasure of the gospel revealed to him by Jesus Christ.

It is not the role of any minister of the gospel to be inventing anything, to be proclaiming new truths or new ways of worship. Paul said *I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures* (I Corinthians 15:3). Paul invented nothing. He was not proclaiming a new religion but only what was according to the Scripture and their fulfilment in Jesus.

Would Paul be surprised to find his letters still being read and studied today, almost 2000 years after he wrote them? Not really. He was aware of his God-given responsibility and authority – even as he was aware of his unworthiness for this high calling (3:8). Paul gave instructions for his letters to be read in the churches. The apostle Peter writes of the letters of Paul being treated on a par with the other Scriptures (II Peter 3:15, 16).

That these people had *surely heard* of God’s grace may refer to Paul’s preaching to them when he first came to Ephesus; or maybe he is thinking of those who have believed since he was there. There is no sense of doubt in the words *if indeed*. The translation *surely* gives the sense better. Paul shared the mystery with them then, and he is ready to remind it of them again in this letter.

In fact he has *already written of it briefly* (3:3). He may be thinking back to the doxology and the mention he made there of *the mystery of his will...that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times he might gather together in one all things in Christ* (1:9, 10). Christ is head over all things to the church. The grace of Jesus Christ is not just for Jews but for Gentiles also. God sent his Son to be the saviour of the world. All who are being saved will be saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. All members of the household of God are members by the grace of God, Jew and Gentile alike. This is what Paul has already written.

Notice the brackets in verse 3b and 4 in the NKJ version. These have a bearing on how we understand ‘the mystery’ in this passage. With the brackets in place we see the mystery of Christ somewhat separated from the mystery mentioned in 3a and explained in verse 6. Without the brackets it is difficult to maintain any distinction. The mystery in verse 6 clearly refers to the Gentiles being brought in.

We have been looking at the mystery of Christ, the mystery of *Christ in you the hope of glory* as Paul writes in Colossians (1:27). In the doxology he seems to be referring to the mystery in this broad and most fundamental sense. His mind now focuses on one aspect of this mystery, an important aspect as he writes to the Gentiles and indeed still a fundamental aspect of the mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Mystery of the Church

That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise of Christ (3:6) is the mystery which Paul rejoices in here. In his wildest dreams Paul the Pharisee had never thought of the Gentiles being welcomed into the house of God. Gentiles were unclean outsiders never to be considered alongside the chosen people of God. All that changed when the mystery of Christ was revealed to him.

My subheading could have been ‘mystery of the Gentiles’ but I have given it as ‘mystery of the church’ for it is in the church, it is in the body of Christ, in the holy temple of the Lord, that this mystery is seen. The old temple was marked by its walls; the church of Christ by a lack of walls. God had made one new man from the two (2:15). The Gentiles who believed were members in equal status with believing Jews in this holy temple. There were no second-class citizens, no special privileges for the Jews any more. We must be alert to modern dispensational teaching which asserts a special dispensation for the Jews when Jesus returns – at one of his future comings!

This mystery was not made known in other ages or previous ages. It was only made known by Jesus to his holy apostles and prophets. Jesus appeared to them and to Paul. The Holy Spirit spoke to Peter telling him to go to the Gentiles Cornelius (Acts 10:19). Jesus called Paul to go to the Gentiles.

We live in the light of this glorious revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are no longer under the law but under grace. Let us not return to that bondage. Paul faced constant pressure to do so. He was in prison because he refused to go back to the law. He would not have Gentiles made subject to what was now obsolete. He proclaimed the now-open secret of Christ and the church, to the glory of God.

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