

The Mystery (Ephesians 3:2-12)
Ephesians [Red Button Series] (Colin Hughes)
Sunday Evening 24 May 2009

Our principle verse this evening is taken from the sixth verse and third chapter of Ephesians, where Saint Paul writes, "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." It may seem strange to hear Paul talk about a "mystery" in light of the gospel. Especially as our understanding of the word, mystery, is taken to mean something that baffles understanding and cannot be explained. So how are we to make sense of this verse?

Let us turn our attention for the moment to the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In each of these we read separate accounts of the disciples asking Jesus why he so often spoke in parables. For example, in Matthew 13, verses 10 and 11, we read, "The disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?' He replied, 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.' " Then in verses 13 and 14 Jesus says, "This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.' "

This may be surprising to many. We often think of Jesus using parables to help simplify the things of God. Yet Jesus explains here that the reason he uses parables is to obscure the truths of God from those that have not been given ears to hear or eyes to see. In verses 16 and 17 Jesus goes on to say, "But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."

In other words, he is telling the disciples to make no mistake. The fact that they understand is not of their own doing, rather it is a gift from God. He explained that righteous people before them, and even the prophets, had not been granted such a gift. A proper understanding of these words spoken by Jesus allows us to begin to grasp the significance of our own saving faith, which ultimately equips us to be more effective in evangelism.

With all of this in mind we will now hear the passage from which our key verse is taken.

2 Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9

and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Ephesians 3:2-12

In theology we talk about two distinct ways in which the truth of God is revealed to the world: general and special revelation.

General, or natural, revelation refers to the way in which every human can discern the existence of a Creator and personal God from the world around us. No one needs to teach us this truth. In addition, what separates us from the animals is that we are each made in His image and His law has been written on our hearts from the moment of our conception. So even the most hardened atheist will have no excuse when he stands before the judgement seat of God.

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul writes, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Romans 1:18-20)

It is ironic that because of God's love for the world, and having chosen to reveal Himself so plainly to every human heart, that it causes us to despise Him. For what we are able to discern about God's holiness stands in contrast to our own fallen nature. So we spend our lives doing our best to suppress the truth, for by it we are already judged.

However, as much as we are able to know these qualities about God we will never discern the specific truths that relate to His plan of salvation. This is a quite distinct form of revelation and we call it special revelation. God's chosen method for communicating these truths are through the prophets and the apostles, which has been immortalised, perfectly, and without error in the pages of Holy Scripture.

A common error that many of us would be unwilling to admit is thinking that the New Testament supersedes the Old Testament and we can somehow forsake and ignore the Old Testament. We know that it is only through the Old Testament prophets that we can make any sense out of the New Testament and our relationship with God. But do we really understand the significance of this? God's message to every believer begins with the very first verse of Genesis and finishes at the final verse of Revelation.

In the opening verse of Saint John's gospel we read, "In the beginning..." A minor diversion into Greek grammar at this point reveals something quite profound and fascinating. The correct Greek for "In the beginning" is "ἐν τῷ ἀρχῆ": ἐν = in, τῷ = the, ἀρχῆ = beginning. However, John wrote, "ἐν ἀρχῆ" In other words, he omits the word, "the", which is called the definite article, and the Greek should be more accurately translated, "In beginning". This is not a mistake, rather it is a deliberate intention by John to parallel the opening verse of his gospel with the opening verse of Genesis, which reads, "In the beginning...". Here the Hebrew also omits the definite article. That is, John is making it abundantly clear to his readers from the very first verse of his gospel that

everything he says must be read alongside the Old Testament, starting with the first verse of Genesis.

A moment ago I suggested that many of us would deny being guilty of placing the Old Testament in a substandard position. Yet how often do we do this when attempting to evangelise? At what point in the Bible do we begin with the gospel message?

A long term research project undertaken by worldwide missionary organisations has found that the most effective evangelism has been done when people are told the story from the point of creation. That is, starting with the Biblical account of creation, moving on to the fall, working through God's plan of redemption, and finally the consummation and judgement at the end of the present age. Trying to communicate the idea that we are sinful people in need of God's forgiveness without first explaining the full story that led to that need is not only ineffective but arrogant. We are saying to God that much as we like His message, we think that our version is better suited to contemporary generations. God has given us His Holy Scriptures not only to edify the body of believers, but to teach, instruct, and guide people back into a proper relationship with God. The Bible is God's special revelation to the world and without us taking time to study these truths and communicate them the world will never hear them.

The devil is the craftiest of all creatures and he will do everything in his power to corrupt, diminish, and undermine God's word. The first words recorded in the Bible that fell from his cursed lips appear in the third chapter of Genesis. Satan asks, "Did God really say?"

So what does this mean to us, and how does it impact our evangelism? What is the orthodox version of the gospel?

Not surprisingly it starts in the book of Genesis. The word, Genesis, comes from the Greek word, *genesiv*, which means origin, creation, or beginning. And the first words in the Bible read, "In the beginning God..." That is, before there was time, space, or matter, God was present. He spoke and the entire universe, the world, and every living creature came into being. This fact alone is enough to humble the proudest of hearts and should make our listeners sit up and pay attention. After each day of creation we read, "And God saw that it was good." Then finally He created man in His image and He declared, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." What an incredible thing that we have been created in the image of our Maker! And yet we did not consider what God had given us to be good enough. We wanted more and wished to be like God. Our act of rebellion came at a great cost. For by that first sin death entered the world. Before that sin there was no death, no pain, and no suffering. It is this state that we look forward to at the final day of judgement. We read in Revelation 21:4, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." But before that, the rest of the Old Testament tells the most amazing story of how God formed the nation of Israel, His chosen people, how He gave them His laws to protect them, and sent His prophets to guide them when they deviated from that path. Ultimately it tells of how God prepared the way for His greatest gift of all. He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, who would fulfil two roles. Firstly Christ would live a perfect life in our place and secondly He would offer Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. In doing so He took on the punishment that we deserved, but also the righteousness works of Christ is given to us to

stand in place of our own works. So when God looks at us He not only sees sinless creatures, but holy and blameless creatures clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

To view this from a different perspective, and to help reinforce the inseparable link between the Old and New Testament, let us briefly consider the notion of covenants. A covenant is a promise between God and the world. It usually consists of some requirement. Fulfilment of the requirement results in a reward, whereas disobedience results in punishment. When God establishes a covenant He will never break it. In the beginning God established a covenant of works with Adam which would apply to all of his descendants, requiring living in perfect obedience. In particular Adam was told that he could eat of any tree in the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The reward would be life, yet disobedience would be death. If Adam had fulfilled this probationary period then he would have inherited the right to eat from the tree of life. But after Adam sinned we read, "And the LORD God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.' So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life." (Genesis 3:22-24)

Once God has established a covenant He cannot change it. Thus it is still necessary for us to fulfil the requirement of perfect obedience if we are to inherit eternal life. But when Paul quotes the Psalmist in his letter to the church in Rome he writes, "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12). The situation seems utterly hopeless on two levels. The first problem is that we do not desire God nor do we seek Him, so we are never going to obey Him. But the second problem is that even if we did seek God then we would be just as incapable as Adam in fulfilling the covenant of works by living a perfect and sinless life.

However, through what Christ has done, God has established a new covenant of grace: whoever believes shall not die but have eternal life. So how do we reconcile these two covenants? Does this not sound like God has abandoned the covenant of works?

We are told in the second chapter of Ephesians, verses 8 and 9, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

In other words, our requirement under this new covenant is to simply trust in Christ. By trusting in the cross we receive forgiveness for our sins. We are rescued from the bondage of sin and we are able to freely choose good or evil. In one sense we are restored to the Adamic state. But if that was all Jesus had done then we would be no better off than Adam and would certainly fail again. We are simply incapable of living a life in perfect obedience. God knew this, so His covenant of grace extends beyond the death of Christ to the life of Christ too. By also trusting in the perfect life of Christ we are able to fulfil the covenant of works. Theologians say that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us.

Listen to these amazing words written by Paul to the Church in Rome: "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the

disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." (Romans 5:18-19)

It is essential that we understand this truth and it resides in our heart. It is the essential truth at the centre of the gospel message: To receive Christ is to trust in His life as much as His death.

Obviously when we evangelise we don't start with covenantal theology. But it does help us to appreciate the importance of preaching the message of the whole Bible. The New Testament makes no sense without the Old Testament.

Of course if it were all that simple then we would share this gospel message and everyone who heard it would turn to God. However, generations of learned Jews before the birth of Christ lived with the words of Scripture close to their heart, yet they neither saw nor understood their significance in relation to the coming Messiah. This is why Paul said, in verse 9 of our passage, that he has been called "to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God." And yet even with the incredible clarity with which Paul spoke many of the most devout Jews in his time did not get it. It is no different for us today and we begin to appreciate why Paul refers to it as a mystery. How can something so straight forward and simple not be understood? Yet the truth is that no matter how faithfully or perfectly we communicate God's message of salvation, no one will ever grasp it unless God intervenes.

It is precisely because of that latter point: unless God intervenes, that we take heart. Not only has God provided a way of salvation, but He has chosen to reveal it to us, and has charged us to share it with all nations. And as if that were not enough, it is God that changes the disposition of the hearts and minds of those that hear it so that they are able to receive it. It is incredible to think that despite our weaknesses, God has chosen to involve us.

Indeed, if we have grasped anything at all of what God has done for us then our love for God will cause us to serve and obey Him. We have a great responsibility to study His Word so that we might know the true gospel message and be able to share it accurately. But ultimately it is not our responsibility to convert the hearts and minds. That is the work of God's business. Not everyone will respond, but we should be overjoyed to know that there are lost souls in the world who are desperate to hear the saving message of the gospel. Our task is simple. We are to share the truths, faithfully according to His Word.

When we take a moment to reflect how blessed we are and what a wonderful ministry God has given us we can appreciate how John Newton was moved to pen such words in his wonderful hymn. "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Amen.