

At the end of the letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul reports that he is in prison for preaching "the mystery of the gospel." In 6:18 He says, pray in all ways, at all times, with all perseverance for all the saints. And then he adds, pray "also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim **the mystery of the gospel**, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." Eph. 6:19-20. What is this mystery?

We are completing a series called *The Invisible War* in which we have considered the reality of spiritual warfare and how to defend ourselves against the strategy of the devil. God has provided some powerful resources for us to counteract the fiery missiles thrown at us by the enemy of our souls. We could spend another 8 weeks on this subject and still only scratch the surface. There is so much about "spiritual forces in heavenly places" that remains a mystery. Some mysteries are meant to be solved. Some are not. Much of what goes on in the spiritual realm is beyond our understanding. That is why Paul said to the Romans, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" Any version of Christianity that attempts to solve every mystery will inevitably lead to all sorts of sacred silliness.

Not long ago I received a letter in the mail that revealed the identity of the antichrist. The sender had created a cryptogram where every letter of the English alphabet was assigned a numerical value. Then, through some complicated math calculations, the mystery was solved. Two thoughts crossed my mind - one, I now understand why the biblical writers could never identify the antichrist. They did not use the ENGLISH alphabet to do the calculations. Secondly, I wondered if I had an antichrist on my staff. I did the math and it came up Jason Jackson! A mystery.

Because God wants to be known, He has revealed some mysteries through the scriptures. That is how Paul came to understand "the mystery of the gospel." It was revealed to him by God. 3:1-3. We can have confidence in our understanding of the gospel because it grows out of God's revelation of Himself in His word. To Paul the word "mystery" is a marvelous plan or purpose of God once concealed but now revealed. For example, in Mark 4:11, Jesus told His disciples, "to you the mystery of the Kingdom has been given." They received knowledge about the purpose of life. In scripture, a "mystery" is something that has been made known by way of revelation.

Your purpose and mine is to be good stewards of **the mystery of the gospel that is the good news of the mystery of Christ Who is the head of a mystery called the church which is the fulfilment of the mystery of God's will.** Let's consider all four of those mysteries this morning.

1. The mystery of the gospel. The message of the gospel is that one day, everything twisted will be made straight, everything wrong will be made right, everything bad will be made good. Good will triumph over evil and God will be vindicated. In the beginning, God gave Adam and Eve one command, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." His vision was to fill the earth with His glory. Adam and Eve obeyed the first part of the command, they multiplied, but rather than spread God's glory all over the earth their descendants stayed in one place. They built cities as monuments to their own glory. Rather than make God's name great, they sought to make a name for themselves for their own glory. They made plans to build a tower in Babel instead of building the kingdom of God. We have the same choice to make; make a name for ourselves or make God's name great. In our fallen state we can't take our eyes off ourselves. We seek our own fame over the fame of His name.

Still, all the leaves of the NT are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be this way. God offered a solution to the sin problem by sending His sinless Son. That's the mystery of Christ.

2. The mystery of Christ. Paul begins to pray in 3:1. And as he does so he mentions his present circumstances. He is a "prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of the Gentiles." But that thought causes Paul to press the pause button on his prayer and to explain instead the nature of his ministry in more detail. The Ephesians may not fully understand why Paul is in jail so he tells them the reason is "the mystery of Christ." (3:4-5). Jesus is Savior.

The desire for a Savior is strong in every human heart. Mohammed Ali was buried this past week. The tributes I heard seemed to confirm his claim that he was the greatest - not just the greatest boxer, he was always "the champ." But he was the greatest civil rights leader, the greatest influence on children, he had the greatest integrity for his stand against the Viet Nam War. As I heard these tributes I was reminded that everyone is looking for a champion. That's why every culture has their saviors.

In 1 Cor. 1:21-24 Paul confronts the fundamental idolatries of his age. The Greeks sought salvation through philosophy. The Jews sought salvation through power. The Greeks suffered from intellectual pride. The Jews labored under a works righteousness mentality. To Greeks a crucified Savior was a foolish idea, the opposite of wisdom. The Jews, a crucified Savior was a sign of weakness, the opposite of power.

The OT message is that salvation is of the Lord. Man is too fallen to save himself, too flawed to keep his covenant with God. The NT message is HOW salvation comes from the Lord. From Christ who is both "the power of God and the wisdom of God." All of scripture points to Christ. After the resurrection, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus intercepted two of His followers who were downcast. He asked them why. They said because Jesus was crucified. "Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures." Every OT passage is an essential piece of the puzzle that reveals Christ.

"He is Isaac, the beloved Son of the Father who was offered as a sacrifice, but nevertheless did not succumb to the power of death. He is Jacob the watchful shepherd, who has such great care for the sheep which he guards. He is the good and compassionate brother Joseph, who in his glory was not ashamed to acknowledge his brothers, however lowly and abject their condition. He is the great sacrificer and bishop Melchizedek who has offered an eternal sacrifice once for all. He is the sovereign lawgiver Moses, writing his law on the tables of our hearts by his Spirit. He is the faithful captain and guide Joshua, to lead us to the Promised Land. He is the victorious and noble king David bringing by his hand all the rebellious power to subjection. He is the magnificent and triumphant king Solomon governing his kingdom in peace and prosperity. He is the strong and powerful Samson who by his death has overwhelmed all his enemies." John Calvin

He IS the greatest. And He is the Head over the mystery of the church.

3. The mystery of the church. 3:6-10. Paul announces to Gentiles as well as to Jews, that the Gospel of Jesus Christ opens the way into the household and family of God for any and all who will trust in the Lord Jesus. One of the unintended consequences of the fall is tribalism. Everyone picks a team and excludes all those who are not on their team. America has never been more divided. Blacks, whites, Hispanics, conservatives, progressives, haves, have-nots.

The consistent message of the NT is that God's intention is to form a people, a community, a visible body. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah and continuing through Paul's epistles and culminating in the book of Revelation the life of the community of faith is the focus. The Bible is not a record of the spiritual state of individuals so much as the story of God's community taking form in the world. It's a tough sell in a culture that emphasizes the individual at the expense of the community. Our society encourages personal, even private spirituality while rejecting the difficult work of forming and sustaining communities. People commonly distinguish between the church and a relationship with Jesus "I am spiritual but not religious." Or, "I am spiritually interested in Jesus but not part of a church of any organized religious community." Those who say that play right into the enemy's strategy - to keep us separated. But God's plan from the beginning was to show "the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places." Eph. 3:9-10

When the Gospel shatters the barriers of human division and unites Jews and Gentiles, people from diverse backgrounds into one, when the Gospel takes the good news about Jesus to the whole world, satanic powers are made to see the manifold wisdom of God. Evil is forced to recognize that God is right, His wisdom is sure, His plan is perfect. That's why Jesus came - verse 11. "This was according to the eternal purpose that he realized in Christ Jesus our Lord." Jesus came in order to bring salvation to the world and exalt the wisdom of God over the wickedness of the devil. It was God's eternal purpose. And so when the Church preaches the Gospel about Jesus you see the effect, according to Paul - men and women, boys and girls, are brought from death to life as the good news about Christ is proclaimed and they receive it in faith, and devils are silenced and stunned at the wisdom and victory of God in the Gospel. Sinners saved and Satan silenced that all glory might belong to God.

4. The mystery of God's will. "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Eph. 1:7-10.

The purpose of God in history is to bring glory to Himself by bringing all of creation under the headship (the authority and rule) of Christ. Everything is summed up in Christ. Our salvation is summed up in Christ. The fall of man is reversed and summed up in Christ. The blessings of the covenant made with Abraham are summed up in Christ. The sacrifices of the OT are summed up in Christ. The Law is summed up in Christ. All of prophecy is summed up in Christ. **God's rule over angelic and celestial powers is summed up in Christ: the fallen celestial powers are defeated by Christ and the unfallen are instructed by Him.** "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him." Col. 2:15

The mystery of the gospel is the good news of the mystery of Christ Who is the head of a mystery called the church which is the fulfilment of the mystery of God's will.

How should we respond to this message? First, pray and thank God for revealing the purpose of life to you. Then pray for the opportunity and privilege of being a good steward of this mystery. A responsible steward passes on the revelation of God's plan to others.

Secondly, pray for me that I would effectively communicate the gospel to several thousand pastors from all over the world this next week. Pray "that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel...that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak." All those pastors from hundreds of countries meeting together to celebrate our oneness in Christ is a display of the wisdom of God before the forces of evil.

Closing prayer - Eph. 3:14-21