

Journey To A Better Life

Lesson 5 . . . The Mystery of the Ages (Ephesians 3:1-13)

Notes

Now Paul is going to let us in on the greatest mystery of all time. It is a secret that for millenniums has been known only to God. It was hidden from the patriarchs, priests, and prophets. The mystery is that there was to be a new creation, a living temple in which God would live to carry out His message of salvation to the world.

As Paul begins to write about the mystery of the ages he says: *For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus . . .* (3:1a). Paul did not consider himself a prisoner of Nero, the Roman emperor, for he knew that his prison experience was a part of God's will for his life—*for the sake of you Gentiles* (3:1b). Had Paul not been in prison he might never have written the prison epistles (see page 12). When we, like Paul, have problems, we must remember that our suffering may be for the benefit of someone else. With this introduction Paul explains the great mystery of the ages, beginning with . . .

The Revelation of the Mystery (3:2-6)

Led by the Holy Spirit, Paul writes: *Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you* (3:2). The key word in this verse is *administration* (*OIKONOMIA*), which means "house manager." It is the management of the property and affairs of others and therefore refers to stewardship. A house manager, like Joseph in the OT, was trusted with managing the household servants, the crops, the finances, etc. How does Romans 15:16 explain the *administration* given to Paul?

Paul was chosen to preach to the Gentiles, as well as Israel. What does 1 Corinthians 4:1-2 say God requires of all of us to whom He has entrusted the knowledge of the message of salvation?

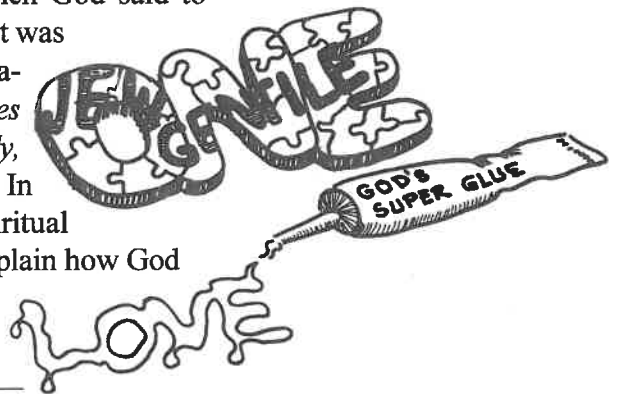
Paul's understanding of the mystery entrusted to him did not come through the instructions of others, but Paul writes: *the mystery made known to me by revelation* (Eph. 3:3). The word *revelation* (*APOKALUPSIS*) means "unveiling" or "the communication of the knowledge of God to the soul." After his conversion on the Damascus road, he immediately went to Arabia for three

years. During this time how did Paul receive the Gospel, according to Galatians 1:12?

The *mystery* to which Paul refers translates a Greek word (*MUSTERION*), which refers to something that cannot be understood or discerned by natural knowledge but is revealed only by divine revelation. The mystery is that Jew and Gentile believers would become equal in one body, the church. The phrase *as I have already written briefly* (Eph. 3:3b) may refer to what he wrote in Galatians 1:11-20.

Paul continues: *In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ* (Eph. 3:4). The word *understand* (*SUNESIS*) means “to bring together.” It is the idea of taking the scrambled pieces of a puzzle and putting them together to make a picture. Paul is putting together pieces of spiritual truth that are the mystery of God, so we can understand it.

The *mystery 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* (3:5). Although the mystery was hinted at in Genesis 12:3, when God said to Abraham *all peoples on earth will be blessed through you*, it was not proclaimed or understood by anyone in the Old Testament. But the *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* (3:6). In other words, Gentiles have the same spiritual rights and spiritual status as the seed of Abraham. How does Galatians 3:29 explain how God makes this possible?



The mystery of the ages is that in Christ Gentiles are spiritually equal with Jews. In Christ all differences are eliminated because we are all one in Him, a part of the same body, with the same promises and spiritual status. This spiritual unity is the mystery of the church. Jesus was so concerned about it that He prayed what in the last sentence of John 17:11?

We must never forget that we are one in Christ and are therefore responsible for helping and encouraging one another and always promoting unity among

true believers, which are those who revere and live by God's written Word. After explaining **the revelation of the mystery**, Paul writes about . . .

The Declaration of the Mystery (3:7-9)

Paul was called to declare the mystery of the ages and in verse 7 writes, *I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me. . . .* The word translated *servant* (*DIAKONOS*) is the word from which we get the English word "deacon," which means a servant rendering free menial work. Each of us has a responsibility to serve and to make known the mystery of God in Christ. It may be helping in Sunday school, passing out bulletins, being a greeter, taking up the offering, or inviting someone to worship services. When we get involved, we will discover our spiritual gifts and the place of service most rewarding and fruitful for us. There is no such thing as a little or insignificant minister, only faithful or unfaithful ones.

Paul was only able to declare the mystery of the ages because of *the working of his power* (7b). The word translated *working* (*ENERGEIAN*) is the word from which we get the English word "energy." In other words, God energizes us to do His will. The word translated *power* (*DUNAMIS*) is the word from which we get our word "dynamite." It does mean power, but here it refers to "ability." When there is something God wants us to do, He gives us the energy and the ability to do it. Therefore, we can never exalt or glorify ourselves.

Instead of boasting of all he had done, Paul demonstrates the attitude of a true servant in verse 8 by writing: *Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me.* The word translated *less than the least* (*ELACHISTOTERO*) literally means "leastest," if there were such a word. It was not enough for Paul to call himself the least, he wanted to place himself even lower than that. How does 1 Corinthians 15:9 reveal why Paul felt this way?

Paul was called *to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ* (3:8b). The word translated *preach* (*EUANGELIZO*) means "to announce good news" and is the word from which we get our English word "evangelize." True biblical preaching always has evangelization in mind. If we are not trying to evangelize, we are not declaring the mystery entrusted to us.

Paul was also called *to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things* (3:9). The phrase *make plain* translates a Greek word (*PHOTISAI*) from which

we get our English word “photo.” In other words, the OT is the “darkroom” in which the “photograph” is developed and then is brought out into the light in the NT so we can see the mystery of the church.

After writing about the **revelation and declaration of the mystery**, Paul writes about . . .

The Motivation for the Mystery (3:10-13)

The purpose for the mystery is . . . *that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known . . .* (3:10a). The word translated *manifold* (*POLUPOIKILOS*) means “much varied” or “many colored.” It was used to refer to multicolored cloth and suggests the variety of the wisdom of God revealed in the mystery of the church, as one might see in an intricately embroidered pattern of a tapestry. The OT saints looked at the backside of God’s tapestry, while in the NT we can see the other side, which is the beautiful picture of the Gospel that is the mystery of the ages.

The phrase *rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms* (3:10b) refers to angels who did not know what God planned for the church age. What does Luke 15:10 say is the angels’ response when they see people accept the proclamation of God’s mystery of redemption.

Angels praise God for the mystery of salvation in the church, because what did Jesus say they will have to do in Matthew 13:41-42?

All this is *according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Eph. 3:11). This is why Christ is *the chief cornerstone* of the church (2:20).

Also, in understanding the mystery of the ages we can understand: *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence* (3:12). It is only in Christ *through faith* that we have the privilege of entering God’s presence. This is an incredible truth for the church because in the OT only the High Priest could enter into God’s presence one day a year, and then only in fear. No one could come into God’s presence with *freedom and confidence* of acceptance. The mystery of the ages is that God

has always intended for Jesus Christ to be our High Priest, and because He is, how does Hebrews 4:16 explain one of our privileges as believers?

Paul ends this section by writing: *I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory* (Eph. 3:13). Paul did not want his readers to lose heart because of his incarceration. His suffering should make his readers feel honored, because if Paul had not been preaching the mystery of the ages he would not be in prison. The fact that God has let Paul and many others suffer so the message of salvation could reach us and the entire world should make us feel honored. Others have suffered and sacrificed that we might reap the benefits.

You may not be an apostle, preacher, evangelist, or teacher, but God will give you the opportunity to tell others about the mystery of the ages. It may be directly or indirectly, such as inviting people to Sunday school, worship services, or a special church event. When you try to expose people to the Gospel, God will give you the courage and ability to do it. If you are not faithful in sharing the mystery of the ages, you betray a sacred trust.

Because of the awesome privilege of being entrusted with the knowledge of the mystery of the ages, what responsibilities do you have, and how should they affect you this week?
