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## **WE WILL BE CHANGED; THE MYSTERY, THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND OUR GREAT PRIVILEGE**

We have been looking at some key passages in the epistles of Paul to understand the meaning of "the mystery". In the previous message, we looked at Ephesians 5:22-32, where Paul speaks of the mystery and the relationship between Christ and the church. We also looked at two other passages (Ephesians 6:10-20 and 2 Thessalonians 2:7-10) where we saw that the fulfilment of God's purposes takes place in the context of spiritual warfare and the opposition of the powers of darkness.

In this message, we will look at "the mystery" in 1 Corinthians 15 and in the teaching of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13.

### **The mystery in 1 Corinthians 15: We will all be changed**

#### **1 Corinthians 15:50-58**

50 Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,

52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

53 For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.

54 But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory.

55 "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law;

57 but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

In verse 51, the apostle Paul writes: "Behold, I tell you a mystery". He goes on to talk about something important that God has now revealed to us, something of significance in the fulfilment of God's purposes. We will look at this important revelation and the related issues.

### 1. *All true believers will be changed*

Paul tells us in verse 51 that “we will all be changed”. Paul is not talking about changes in general. He is talking about how we will be changed from flesh and blood, from what is perishable, to what is appropriate for the kingdom of God.

While we are on earth, our body can be described as flesh and blood and perishable. This body is appropriate for our life on earth, but not for the life to come. In verse 50, Paul says: “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable”. Then in verse 53, he tells us: “this perishable must put on the imperishable”. So, Paul is saying that this perishable body will be changed to one that is imperishable.

Not only that, in earlier verses, Paul also tells us that this body will be changed from that which is weak to that which is glorious and powerful – “it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power” (v. 43); and from that which is natural to that which is spiritual – “it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body” (v. 44). Then in verse 54, Paul tells us that this new body we will have will be one that is immortal – “but when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality”.

So, the bodies of all true believers will be changed – from perishable to imperishable, from natural to spiritual, from weak and dishonourable to glorious and powerful, from mortal to immortal.

### 2. *There will be a rapture*

When we read 1 Corinthians 15 together with 1 Thessalonians 4, we will see that this change takes place at the rapture.

#### **1 Corinthians 15:51-52**

51 Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed,

52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

Verse 51 tells us that those who have died will be resurrected, and they will be changed from the perishable to the imperishable. They will have this new body, the spiritual body of power and glory.

But in verse 51, we also read that “we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed”. This means that at that time, some believers will still be alive. What then will happen to them? They will likewise be changed, but they will be changed without having to pass through the process of death while being in this physical body. All this will take place “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17 help us to see that this change takes place in the context of the rapture.

**1 Thessalonians 4:15-17**

15 For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep

16 For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

17 Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.

Those who are alive when the Lord comes will be caught up together in the clouds to meet Him in the air. And then they will carry on and be with the Lord forever. This event of being caught up is commonly referred to as the rapture.

*3. The problem of death because of sin will be resolved*

**1 Corinthians 15:54**

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "Death is swallowed up in victory.

Because of sin, death sets in – both spiritual and physical death. Thankfully, the Lord Jesus died on our behalf to resolve the problem of death brought about by sin. At the point of conversion, our sins are forgiven and we receive the gift of eternal life. The problem of physical death has also been resolved. When the Lord Jesus comes again, our perishable body will be changed and become imperishable, and that which is mortal takes on immortality. That is why Paul could triumphantly say: "Death is swallowed up in victory".

*4. Our labour in the Lord will not be in vain*

**1 Corinthians 15:58**

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

This verse can be appreciated from the angle that Paul is encouraging believers that if their labour is in the Lord, it will not be in vain. But if it is in their own strength, then it will be in vain. So if our labour is in the Lord, we can, even in the midst of difficulties, remain steadfast and persevere. We can always abound in the work of the Lord.

But I see that in this context, Paul is saying more than this. Paul begins this verse with “therefore”, which links this verse to what he has been saying before this. If we look at this passage carefully, we can see that one important factor that can greatly encourage us to persevere in serving the Lord is that there will be abiding significance in true service to the Lord. It has meaning beyond our time on earth. Its significance will not end in death. It carries on. True service to the Lord will have abiding significance because there is life after death.

Based on this understanding, we can say that Paul is here trying to help believers appreciate the issues of life from an eternal perspective.

The problem of death has been resolved. There will be abiding meaning for those who love the Lord. Even their bodies will be transformed, changed to the glorious, powerful, spiritual bodies that are imperishable and immortal. And our labour in the Lord, and whatever that is positive in our lives on earth, will have abiding significance.

This is a strong encouragement to us to persevere, to concentrate on that which really matters. We need not be perturbed by the temporal difficulties of life, by the opposition of the evil one, by the trials we face.

### **The mystery, the kingdom of God and our great privilege**

I now want to go on to the last major section on the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes: the mystery, the kingdom of God and our great privilege. Having referred to passages in the epistles of Paul, I will now be looking at the gospels.

In my study of the word “mystery”, I notice that in the New Testament, the Lord Jesus is the first person to use the word “mystery” or “mysteries”.

The word “mystery” or “mysteries” occurs only three times in the Gospels. And each time it is from the mouth of the Lord Jesus. The three occurrences are:

#### **Matthew 13:11**

Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

#### **Mark 4:11**

And He was saying to them, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,

**Luke 8:10**

And He said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

In fact, if we look at the context of these verses, we will see that they are all from parallel passages. One difference is that in Matthew and Luke, the Lord uses the plural form "mysteries" whereas in Mark, He uses the singular form "mystery".

Is there a difference between "the mysteries" and "the mystery"? If we look at the contexts, we will know that the Lord Jesus is talking about the same thing. The plural form "the mysteries" tells us there are various aspects and features in the mystery. When the singular form is used, the various aspects are viewed as a whole, as one unit. Together they form one whole.

In all the three passages, the Lord Jesus uses the word "mystery" or "mysteries" in an emphatic manner, which tells us that He has something very important to communicate.

We will now look at the passage in Matthew 13 and see what important truths the Lord wants to communicate to us.

**Matthew 13:11-17**

11 Jesus answered them, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.

12 "For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.

13 "Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

14 "In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says, 'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;

You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;

15 For the heart of this people has become dull,

With their ears they scarcely hear,

And they have closed their eyes,

Otherwise they would see with their eyes,

Hear with their ears,

And understand with their heart and return,

And I would heal them.'

16 "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

17 "For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

### *1. The mysteries concern the kingdom of God*

In verse 11, the Lord Jesus says: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven". This tells us that the heart of the revelation of the mystery concerns God's kingdom. As we have seen in the preceding messages, Paul uses the expressions: "the mystery of Christ", "the mystery of the faith" and "the mystery of the gospel". At the heart of the mystery is the Lord Jesus Christ. At the heart of the mystery is the faith. At the heart of the mystery is the gospel. And here, at the heart of the mystery or the mysteries is the kingdom of God. This key word "mystery" links together all these important truths and helps us see how they are related and central to the fulfilment of God's purposes. At the heart of the mystery is the gospel or the good news of what God has done and provided for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Knowing Christ and what matters in His kingdom, and submission to His reign in His kingdom, is at the heart of the Christian faith and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

When the Lord Jesus said to the disciples, "to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God" and "blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear", a major aspect has to do with the truths He is seeking to communicate through His preaching and teaching. And a major theme in His teaching and preaching is the kingdom of God.

Early in His ministry, He said: "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose" (Luke 4:43).

During His three years of public ministry, He constantly taught and spoke about the kingdom of God, and the things of God's kingdom: what it is like, how one can have a part in it, how it grows, and the values, perspective, attitudes and conduct that ought to characterise those in the kingdom of God.

He continued to do so even after His resurrection, before He ascended. During the forty days when He appeared to the apostles, what He spoke to them about was "the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3).

Together with His teaching and preaching, Christ also revealed who He is, His being, His attributes, His character. All these culminated at the event of the Cross. The disciples could see, hear and observe Him as they ministered together with Him and related with Him. And these have been recorded in the Scriptures for us. Through Christ the Logos, the Word of God, God the Father is revealing major truths concerning Himself and His kingdom.

## *2. The mysteries of the kingdom of God were revealed to the disciples of Christ at that point in time*

In verse 11, the Lord Jesus was addressing His disciples, and He told them: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted".

So the mysteries have been revealed to the disciples of Christ at that point in time. And today, through the Scriptures, they have been revealed to us. God did not keep the mysteries of the kingdom to Himself. He wants to reveal them to His children, and with the coming of Christ, they have indeed been revealed.

## *3. Something very important and precious*

The significance and precious value of knowing the mysteries of the kingdom come through strongly in the words of the Lord Jesus to His disciples in verses 16-17.

### **Matthew 13:16-17**

16 "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear.

17 "For truly I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

It is a privilege to have the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven made known to us. This privilege has not been granted to non-believers. But of course, if non-believers repent and enter into the kingdom of God, they too can have the opportunity to understand and see these truths.

## *4. We are blessed if we see and hear*

In verse 16, the Lord Jesus told His disciples how blessed they were because they could see and hear the mysteries of the kingdom. Then, in the next verse (v. 17), He told them that many prophets and righteous men had longed to see what they have seen and hear what they have heard, but were not given the opportunity because the time had not come for such revelations.

## **Our great privilege to have insight into the mystery**

### *Revelation of the mystery with the coming of the Lord Jesus*

The fullness of time came with the incarnation of the Logos, at the first coming of the Lord Jesus – in His person, in His teaching and preaching, in His life, culminating at the event of the Cross. It is at this point in history that the time has come for "the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past" (Rom. 16:25).

The Lord Jesus, the Word of God, is God's ultimate revelation and communication to us. This is the reason Paul uses the expression "the mystery of Christ". Christ is at the heart of God's revelation of the mystery, and the role of Christ is central to the fulfilment of God's purposes. It is therefore very fitting that the time for the revelation of the mystery takes place with the coming of the Lord Jesus into this world.

At the first coming of Christ, an important and new phase in the unfolding and fulfilment of God's purposes has begun! It is the inauguration of the New Covenant through the Lord Jesus Christ. We are indeed blessed. That which was denied God's people of Old Testament times has been granted to us. This is something we must take note of and be deeply impressed with.

*Paul builds on the revelation of the mystery by the Lord Jesus*

After the death, resurrection and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, there was fuller revelation to the apostles and the prophets, especially to the apostle Paul. This is what we have been considering in the preceding messages, what God had revealed to the apostle Paul, about the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

As we consider the mystery or mysteries as taught in Paul's epistles and as taught by the Lord Jesus, we can see that both Paul and the Lord Jesus used the word "mystery" in the same way – what has been in God's heart which pertains to the fulfilment of His purposes which was hidden in times past but now revealed. We can say that Paul's insights into the mystery built upon the revelation of the mystery by the Lord Jesus.

*A fuller picture: The mystery, Christ, the kingdom of God and the role of the church*

The teaching of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 13 and the passages in Paul's epistles, which we have looked at in the preceding messages, help us to see the close relationship between Christ, the mystery and the kingdom of God, and also the role of the church. If we appreciate these relationships properly, we would then set our heart on that which is close to God's heart – the mystery of the kingdom – the establishment and advancement of His kingdom.

And this is also what the Lord Jesus teaches us in the pattern prayer: "Hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done". The advancement of God's kingdom is at the very heart of the mystery and it should be at the centre of the longing of our hearts. God's kingdom advances as the truths about the person of Christ and His death, and the meaning and implications of a proper appreciation of these vital truths, are being preached, taught and communicated.

This is what we should ponder over for our own lives. This is what we should set our hearts on and be committed to – the mystery, the person of Christ, the kingdom of God. This is the role of the believer and the role of the church.

*What the apostle Paul concentrated upon in his ministry*

The closing words of the Book of Acts give us a picture of the consuming passion of Paul's life:

**Acts 28:30-31**

30 And he [*the apostle Paul*] stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him,  
31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

For two full years, what was the apostle Paul doing? What was he devoting his life to? "Preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ". Not just for those two years, but throughout his life since his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

*Following the example of the Lord Jesus*

The apostle Paul was merely following the example of the Lord Jesus. Throughout the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, He was preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God and drawing men to Himself.

For the Lord Jesus, it is only appropriate to preach Himself and to draw men to Himself. "I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life" (John 8:12). "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

It would be wrong for us to draw others to ourselves. The proper thing to do is to draw men to the Lord Jesus, to point others to Him. Like John the Baptist, we are to proclaim: "Behold the Lamb of God".

And this was what the apostle Paul concentrated upon – preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God and drawing men to the Lord Jesus Christ and to salvation in Him.

**How we may gain insight into the mystery**

Though the central truths concerning the fulfilment of God's purposes have been revealed since New Testament times and have been recorded in the Scriptures for us, many believers remain in relative ignorance. This is a serious matter.

How can we know the major truths that God has revealed in the Scriptures concerning the fulfilment of His purposes? I will consider with you four important related points.

### *1. Hungering, thirsting and earnestly seeking to understand what God has revealed in the Scriptures*

Do you have that hunger, thirst and earnestness? If not, pray that God will evoke within your heart a hunger and thirst. Our eagerness and earnestness to know what God has revealed about His kingdom should be like that of the merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding a pearl of great value, sold all he had and bought it. Similarly, we should be like the man who sold all he had in order to buy the field with the hidden treasure (Matt. 13:44-46).

Are the things of God's kingdom so important to us that we will go to great lengths to seek for them and understand them?

### *2. Praying for spiritual insight*

Although God has revealed His truths in the Scriptures, we may not have seen it the way we should, with the kind of seeing that the Lord Jesus describes as blessed.

To truly understand the truths as God intends, we need spiritual insight. But how do we gain spiritual insight? Spiritual insight can come only from God. And God delights to grant insight into deep truths to receptive hearts. Let us learn to value God's revelations and pray that God will prepare our hearts so that He may be pleased to grant us spiritual insight into the mystery and the implications involved.

And when God gives us true insight, things come alive. We really see them. We become men and women of vision. It is like the heavenly vision that motivated Paul. It is critical that each one of us become a man or woman of vision, and that we be true to that heavenly vision.

### *3. Availing ourselves to all opportunities to grow in spiritual understanding and insight*

Many areas of truth that are important and complex do not become clear to us all at once or all of a sudden. We need to do our part. We need to have the right attitude in our seeking: diligence, perseverance, prayerfulness, pondering over before God.

Through the church in the local and universal context, God makes available to us opportunities to learn and grow. He gives gifts to His people who can then help us to gain insight into His revelations. If we truly treasure His truth, we would ask, seek and knock, and God would open the door and lead us into His truth.

### *4. Aligning our hearts with God's heart*

Are we prepared to align our hearts with God's? Do we really want to? Or are we seeking knowledge just for interest, just so we could be known as knowledgeable people?

Do we have a wishy-washy approach to life? Are we like the rocky soil or the thorny ground in the Lord's parable? We respond rapidly. We look promising, but when difficulties come, or when the affairs of this life come crowding in, we become choked and we wither. If this is the kind of heart we have, we will not truly benefit from what God wants to reveal.

Just as the Lord Jesus tells us not to throw pearls before swine and not to give what is holy to dogs, likewise, God is not pleased to reveal to us precious truths unless our hearts and attitudes are right and we are truly interested. Then He will grant us fuller appreciation, understanding and true insight into the things that are really important to Him.

If we truly want to know what is in God's heart so that we can align our hearts with His and be one with Him, we must work at what we understand in a wholehearted manner and with perseverance.

### **Concluding remarks**

Let us follow the example of Paul who responded wholeheartedly to what God revealed to him. Let us be like the good soil that receives the seed in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15). If our attitudes and our approach are right, then we can trust God to help us see and understand all the important areas of truth because He desires that we understand them and live accordingly. This is the way to a life that is truly effective, satisfying and fruitful.

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