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THE MYSTERY AND THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PURPOSES

In the previous message, I considered with you the importance of knowing the answers to the fundamental issues of life: What is life all about? How should we live our life? What should our goals be? How can we live truly satisfying and fulfilling lives? What should we channel our time, energy and resources towards?

We saw that the answers to these questions lie with God our Creator, the God of perfect knowledge and wisdom. Through the Scriptures, God has revealed His purposes and intentions in creating us. Our approach must therefore be to understand what He has to say in the Scriptures about His purposes and intentions and how they can be fulfilled.

The keyword: Mystery

There is a keyword in the Scriptures – in the New Testament – that can help us understand what has been in God's heart concerning the fulfilment of His purposes. The keyword is: mystery.

As we look at the various relevant passages where this keyword appears, we can see that God uses this word in the New Testament and especially in the epistles of Paul to link together major issues concerning His eternal purpose. This helps us to see the big picture. This word is like a golden thread that weaves together the major strands of this important subject into a coherent, beautiful tapestry.

As we look at these passages, we will be able to appreciate the major issues of life and their relationships with the big picture, such as:

- How God intends His eternal purpose to be fulfilled
- The depth and richness of life that God intends for mankind and how they can be attained
- The centrality of the role of Christ in the fulfilment of God's purposes
- What we have and can find in Christ
- The infinite potential for moral and spiritual development for every man in Christ
- All believers having a body appropriate for God's eternal kingdom – a wonderful, spiritual body that is imperishable, immortal and glorious
- The role and significance of the church in the fulfilment of God's purposes
- God's intention and goal for the church
- The relationship between Christ and the church

- The central place of the kingdom of God and the issues pertaining to God's kingdom
- The heart of Paul's ministry – what Paul concentrated on, what he strived for, and what we likewise should be doing
- The meaning of the communication of the gospel in all its breadth and depth
- Spiritual and satanic opposition to the fulfilment of God's purposes
- The heart of God's revelation
- The life of faith

The way Paul uses the term "mystery" is different from the way it is generally being used in the English language. In the English language, the word mystery tends to conjure in our mind something that we cannot quite understand, and which, once we have understood, no longer remains a mystery. For example, it may be a mystery who committed the murder. But once you know it is the butler, it is no longer a mystery. But Paul does not use "mystery" in this sense. Instead, he uses "mystery" to refer to important truths that relate to the fulfilment of God's purposes – that which can only be known by God's revelation. It is something man cannot come to understand and see on his own apart from God's revelation. And after God has revealed, it is still termed "mystery".

The way Paul uses the term "mystery" can be illustrated by what he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:51.

1 Corinthians 15:51

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

When Paul wrote "Behold, I tell you a mystery", he did not go on to talk about something mysterious. Instead, he went on to talk about something important that God has revealed. He talked about the glorious and imperishable spiritual body that believers will have in God's eternal kingdom, which is an integral part of the fulfilment of God's purposes.

In this message, I will be looking at Paul's use of this term in his letters to the Ephesians and to the Romans, and in his first letter to Timothy.

"The mystery" in Paul's letter to the Ephesians

Paul's epistle to the Ephesians sheds much light on the whole subject of the fulfilment of God's purposes, from the big picture and the major issues, to issues of everyday life, and how they relate to one another. This is an integrated, total approach to life. Ephesians is also the key epistle that can help us appreciate the meaning and significance of the word "mystery". It is therefore appropriate that we begin with this epistle.

A key verse is 3:11. Here, Paul speaks of the "the eternal purpose which He [God] carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord". To understand this verse, we need to consider its context. In fact, we need to go back to the beginning of this letter, for that's when Paul introduces this main theme.

Ephesians 1:1-18

Ephesians 1:1-18

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and who are faithful in Christ Jesus:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,

4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love

5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will,

6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

8 which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight

9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him

10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him

11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory.

13 In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise,

14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.

15 For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints,

16 do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers;

17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him.

18 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,

Paul begins his letter by telling us that from the beginning, even before the foundation of the world, God desires that we should be holy and blameless (v. 4). God's predetermined plan has been that we would have to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ (v. 5) in order that we may enter into His kind intention towards us in Christ. It is the event of Christ's death on the Cross that makes it possible for us to be forgiven of our sins and be accepted by God. God has taken the initiative to do all that is necessary so that we may be able to enter into what He intends for us in Christ. This is a demonstration of God's grace which He freely bestowed on us in Christ (vs. 6-8).

Then in verse 9, Paul uses the term "the mystery" for the first time in this letter. He tells us that God has now made known to us the "mystery of His will" – that which has been in His heart from the beginning. At the heart of the mystery is God's kind intention towards us which He purposed in Christ. An important feature of the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes is that God will sum up all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth (v. 10). Ephesians chapter one tells us clearly that Christ is at the centre of the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose.

In verses 10-11, Paul tells us that "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will". So as to the mystery – God's purposes, how He will fulfil them, His intentions for us in Christ, the inheritance that awaits us – all these have been in the mind of God from the beginning. He did not consult anyone. He has predestined it according to His own purpose. It was decided by God – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – "to the praise of His glory" (vs. 12, 14). This would be something glorious and it would bring glory to God. God's purposes ultimately would be fulfilled by those who are in Christ. Those who are not in Christ will have no part in it. This truth is reflected throughout this passage, including in verse 13: "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise".

In verse 18, Paul prays "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling". Not only has Paul himself come to know the mystery, he also wants us to know it. For us to truly know the mystery, the eyes of our hearts must be enlightened. Spiritual things cannot be known just with our minds. We cannot search it out by ourselves. God must reveal. But even after God has revealed it in the Scriptures or it has been told to us, spiritual insight is still needed to see it. So Paul prays for the Ephesian believers that their hearts may be enlightened to see and know the hope of His calling and the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.

Believers often say they want to know God's will. By that, they often mean knowing God's will in specific areas and issues. But at the heart of knowing God's will is knowing "the mystery of His will" (Eph. 1:9). And this, God has now made known to us. He has made known to us His purposes and how He intends to fulfil them. The specific aspects of God's will – career, marriage, daily life and the wise use of our time and resources – all bear a relationship to "the mystery of His will", as they bear a relationship to the fulfilment of His purposes. In fact, how significant the specific issues are depends on how significant they are in relation to the fulfilment of God's purposes.

We shall now consider chapter three of Ephesians in which Paul dwells on this theme of the mystery and God's eternal purpose with even greater clarity.

Ephesians 3:1-13

Ephesians 3:1-13

1 For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you;

3 that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery as I wrote before in brief.

4 By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ,

5 which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;

6 to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,

7 of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power.

8 To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ,

9 and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;

10 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.

11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,

12 in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him.

13 Therefore I ask you not to lose heart at my tribulations on your behalf, for they are your glory.

In verses 1 and 2, Paul speaks of the apostolic ministry God has entrusted to him, which is to make known God's gracious plan for mankind, especially how His plan relates to the Gentiles.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul makes clear "the mystery" refers to what God has revealed to him, which he could not have known otherwise. It is God who granted him insight into it.

Verse 5 tells us the mystery had been hidden from men. But now God, through the Holy Spirit, has made it known to His apostles and prophets.

In verses 6 and 7, Paul tells us an important aspect of the mystery is that in Christ Jesus, Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body of Christ. This is the gospel that God made Paul a minister of. And by God's enabling, Paul is fulfilling that call.

Verses 8 and 9 tell us that a major aspect of Paul's ministry is to preach the unfathomable riches of Christ and to shed light on the content of the mystery. That was the goal of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles.

We learn in verses 10 to 12 that God has an eternal purpose, and that the Lord Jesus Christ is central to its fulfilment. God wants to manifest His manifold wisdom to all in the spiritual realm, and He is doing it through His church.

We see in verse 13 that as Paul responds to God's calling, as he proclaims God's message, he faces much suffering and tribulations. But he is untroubled by all these, for he knows how important this message is, and he has committed himself to proclaiming it at any cost.

Significance of "the mystery"

Let us consider the significance of the mystery as revealed in Ephesians 3.

1. The mystery has to do with the fulfilment of God's eternal purpose.

Paul tells us in verse 11 that God has an eternal purpose. The mystery he speaks about in verses 3 and 4 is related to God's eternal purpose and its fulfilment.

2. The mystery is at the heart of Paul's ministry.

From Ephesians 3, it is clear that at the heart of Paul's ministry is the mystery. God has granted Paul insight into the mystery (v. 3). He has made him a minister of the gospel (vs. 6-7) so he could preach the unfathomable riches of Christ (v. 8) and make known the administration of the mystery (v. 9).

3. At the heart of the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purpose is the person and role of Christ.

In verse 4, Paul says: "...you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ". In verse 8, he mentions about preaching "the unfathomable riches of Christ". And in verse 11, he says: "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ".

So at the heart of the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes is the person and role of Christ. We can see this even more clearly in Colossians 2:2-3: "...a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". We will examine this verse in greater detail in the next message.

4. The mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes involve the church.

Verse 10 says: "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".

In the preceding verses, Paul tells us about the ministry God has entrusted to him. In this verse, he begins with "so that", which indicates that this is the direction of his ministry. The direction of Paul's proclamation of the gospel is that the manifold wisdom of God will be made known through the church.

There are many facets and angles of appreciating the manifold wisdom of God. God intends that His wisdom be manifested, and that it be made known through the church. So, if the church functions healthily as God intends, it will manifest the manifold wisdom of God. There is indeed great potential in church life, and God intends to bring about many things through the healthy outworking of church life. This is an important aspect of the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

5. The mystery has significance in the spiritual realm.

We read further in verse 10 that the manifold wisdom of God is to be made known to "the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places". This means that the mystery, the fulfilment of God's purposes, has significance in the spiritual realm. It goes beyond God's intentions for man, to the angelic beings and the powers of darkness. We thus see that the significance of the church, according to God's purposes, goes beyond its significance to the welfare of man.

6. The mystery involves God's intentions for all mankind in Christ.

We read in verse 6 that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel". This tells us that the mystery involves God's intentions for all mankind. There will be no

distinction. People of any race or tongue may, in Christ, become God's people, members of the body of Christ.

For us, we tend to take these things for granted. We are so familiar with the truth that all believers are members of the body of Christ. But to the recipients of Paul's letter, this truth would have come as a breath of fresh air. It would be to them a new insight.

The Jews at that time regarded themselves, but not the Gentiles, as God's chosen people. We see an example of this kind of mentality in Acts 10 and 11. Even the apostle Peter was hesitant when God wanted him to minister to Cornelius, a Gentile. Eventually, Peter did go to Cornelius' home. Cornelius and the others present responded positively to the gospel and they were baptised with the Holy Spirit. However, when Peter returned to Jerusalem, some Jews took issue with him. They questioned him for being with uncircumcised people and for eating with them. So the truth that, in Christ, Jews and Gentiles are now fellow heirs, fellow members of the body of Christ, would indeed have been a fresh insight at that time.

This truth – that all mankind has been in God's heart – is actually not new. It has been prophesied in the Old Testament. It's just that it had not been so clearly and fully revealed. A scriptural passage where this truth can be found is the Servant Song in Isaiah 49, which speaks of the role and ministry of the Messiah:

Isaiah 49:6

He [God] says, "It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of
Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

The Old Testament revealed that it was in God's heart that Christ be a light to the nations and that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

We see a similar prophecy in Isaiah 42:6, another Servant Song:

Isaiah 42:6

"I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you,
And I will appoint you as a covenant to the people,
As a light to the nations,

Here again, we see the ministry of the Messiah. His role is not restricted to Israel. He is to be "as a light to the nations", that is, to all the people of the world.

Although there are indications in the Old Testament that God's salvation is for all mankind, it is only in the New Testament that this is revealed in full clarity. I can't

see anywhere in the Old Testament where this truth is as clearly expressed as the way Paul puts it here in Ephesians – that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body of Christ and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. That is, all true believers – Jew or Gentile, young or old, male or female – are one in Christ. This was indeed a very important revelation at that time.

7. The mystery is what the gospel is all about.

The term "gospel" is often used in too narrow a sense. It is important that we appreciate the gospel, the good news, in all its breadth and depth.

Let us look again at Ephesians 3:6-11 and note the phrases Paul uses. Paul says in verses 6 and 7: "...through the gospel, of which I was made a minister". Then in the subsequent verses, he elaborates on the gospel he was made a minister of. He is to preach to the Gentiles the "unfathomable riches of Christ" (v. 8) and to "bring to light what is the administration of the mystery" (v. 9), "so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church" (v. 10), "in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 11). All these – the unfathomable riches of Christ, the mystery, the manifold wisdom of God, God's eternal purpose – are part and parcel of the meaning of the gospel.

Besides chapters 1 and 3 of Ephesians, Paul also uses the term "mystery" towards the end of this letter. Here, he refers to "the mystery of the gospel".

Ephesians 6:19

and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,

In the preceding verses, Paul dwells on the subject of spiritual warfare. In verse 18, he mentions about praying "at all times in the Spirit" and being "on the alert with perseverance and petition for all the saints". Then in verse 19 he requests prayer for his ministry so that he may "make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel".

When Paul mentions "the mystery of the gospel", he is not saying that the gospel is mysterious. Rather, he is saying that at the very heart and substance of the gospel is the mystery and how it pertains to the fulfilment of God's purposes. Paul knows that, as God's ambassador, he has the responsibility to preach, teach and communicate the gospel in the best way he can. It is a solemn responsibility. He is therefore requesting prayers that he may make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, that he may speak as he ought to speak (vs. 19-20).

It is God's intention that the content and meaning of the mystery be made known. This is the communication of the gospel. In fact, this is at the very heart and substance of true ministry. Where there is true ministry, there must be the making known of the mystery, and the bringing to pass of what is in God's heart, His eternal

purpose in Christ. This is the content of the good news, the gospel entrusted to believers.

"The mystery" in Paul's letter to the Romans

In his letter to the Roman Christians, Paul also uses the term "mystery". He does so in two places. In chapter 11, he uses the term in the context of God's intentions for Israel. Let us take a look at the other reference in chapter 16.

Romans 16:25-26

25 Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past,
26 but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith;

Here, Paul concludes his epistle by crystallising the heart of his ministry, which is to communicate the mystery, and the relationship between the mystery, the gospel, the preaching of Christ and the obedience of faith. In just two verses, Paul brings together all these concepts and links them all together in a very beautiful way.

Let us take note of a few points from this passage:

1. "...according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery". Here, we see that the gospel or the good news Paul preaches is in accordance to the revelation of the mystery. At the heart of it is the preaching of Christ. The heart of the mystery and fulfilment of the purposes of God involve the person of Christ.
2. As in Ephesians 1 and 3, Paul again mentions in this passage in Romans 16 that the mystery has been kept secret for long ages past but is now manifested (vs. 25-26). The "now" here refers to New Testament times. As we have seen, to some degree, the mystery has already been revealed in Old Testament times. But it was not so clearly and fully revealed then as it is now.
3. "...by the Scriptures of the prophets" – this can be translated as "the prophetic Scriptures". This tells us that the mystery has been revealed in the Scriptures.
4. "...according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations" tells us that it is God's intention that this mystery be made known to all the nations.
5. "...leading to obedience of faith". The word "leading" tells us the goal, the direction, the result hoped for, is obedience of faith. It means that the proclamation of the mystery is not just for us to have an idea what it is about. It is also meant to

lead to a life of faith. God requires from us a positive response of faith to the truth of the gospel, the mystery He has now made known.

"The mystery" in Paul's first letter to Timothy

There is a reference to "the mystery" in 1 Timothy. In chapter 3, Paul talks about the qualities of deacons. They must be men of dignity; they must not be double-tongued, not fond of sordid gain and so on. In verse 9, he says:

1 Timothy 3:9

but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

"Holding to the mystery of the faith" is an important quality of deacons. At the heart of the Christian faith is the mystery God has revealed. The mystery of the faith is so important deacons must not deviate from it, dilute it, distort it, or compromise it in any way. They must hold on to the mystery of the faith and discharge their responsibilities faithfully, doing so "with a clear conscience".

Concluding remarks

In this message, we have looked at a few key passages where the term "mystery" is used. It is vital that we gain insight into what the mystery means. It will help us to understand what God's purposes are and how He desires His purposes to be fulfilled. We can then, like the apostle Paul, concentrate all our energy on them and align our hearts with what is in God's heart.

In subsequent messages, I will bring together the different aspects to form a composite picture of what has been in the heart of God pertaining to the fulfilment of His purposes. We will dwell more on this subject, looking further into Paul's letters, especially those to the Ephesians and Colossians.

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