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THE MYSTERY AND THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PURPOSES 2

What does the Scriptures say about the fulfilment of God's purposes and how are the major issues of life related to it? In the last message, I mentioned there is a key word in the Scriptures that can help us see the big picture of this important subject. The keyword is: mystery. This word is like a golden thread that weaves together the major strands of this central theme in the Scriptures into a coherent, beautiful tapestry. I then went on to consider with you Paul's use of the word "mystery" in Ephesians 1:1-18, Ephesians 3:1-13, Romans 16:25-26 and 1 Timothy 3:9. The concentration of that message was on Ephesians 3.

In this message, I will continue to look at the use of the word "mystery" in other writings of Paul. I will begin with another key epistle – Paul's epistle to the Colossians. This epistle sheds much light on the mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes. It complements and confirms our understanding of the mystery that Paul wrote about in Ephesians and Romans.

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

In the following verses, Paul talks about the gospel and the proclamation of the gospel, of which he was made a minister.

Colossians 1:21-2:3

21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds,

22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—

23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

24 Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions

25 Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out *the preaching of the word of God*,

26 that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints

27 to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

28 We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ.

29 For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me

1 For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face,

2 that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself,

3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I will highlight and elaborate on several major issues that this passage brings up:

1. *"...that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery..." (vs. 25-26)*

In verses 25-26, Paul tells us that God wanted him to "fully carry out the preaching of the word of God".

In the NASB translation, "the preaching of" is in italics, which means this phrase is not in the original text. Apparently the translators think this phrase is implied, but I think it is better to leave it out because it unnecessarily limits the meaning of what Paul is trying to communicate here. In fact, the margin of verse 25 states that the literal translation is "make full the word of God". So, an alternate translation could be "fulfil the word of God" or "fully carry out the word of God". What it means then is that as God's steward, Paul is to fully carry out the word of God in all its breadth and depth.

We also see from these two verses that "the mystery" has to do with "the word of God". The mystery is at the heart of what God has entrusted to Paul. And Paul is to fully carry it out. One way he does so is through preaching. But it is not by preaching alone. It also includes different ways Paul communicates and lives out the truth of the gospel and impacts the lives of others, for example, through teaching, prayer and through his epistles. Through whatever means, Paul is to fully carry out the word of God, the mystery, all that God has revealed, all that God desires to see accomplished. This is what Paul ought to do and what he seeks to do.

The expression "word of God" is rich in meaning. In 1984, I preached a series of messages on this expression. I showed from the Scriptures that the expression "word of God" has several related meanings. It could refer to what God has spoken or revealed, the gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Here, in Colossians, we

see another related meaning of the expression "word of God". In Colossians 1:25-26, the "word of God" is also termed "the mystery". Although the term "the word of God" is used in different senses, the various meanings of that term do bear a relationship with each other. At the heart of what God has revealed in the Scriptures and what God desires His servants to transmit is the mystery, the gospel and the person and role of the Lord Jesus Christ in the fulfilment of God's purposes. And it is the Holy Spirit who enables God's servants to communicate these truths and enables the hearers to understand and receive the meaning of what is being transmitted.

2. *"that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints" (v. 26)*

This verse tells us that the mystery, which has been hidden from past ages and generations, has now been revealed by God. It has "now been manifested to His saints". God's intention is that all mankind will understand the mystery. To understand it, we have to know the Lord and enter His kingdom. We have to be born again. Only believers, His saints, are able to appreciate the mystery.

3. *"the riches of the glory of this mystery" (v. 27)*

In this verse, Paul uses the expression "the riches of the glory". By this, he is telling us that the mystery is not something superficial, but something glorious. The mystery involves spiritual riches. It is very rich in meaning.

Paul also talks about this glorious mystery in 1 Corinthians 2:7:

1 Corinthians 2:7

but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory;

The expression "which God predestined before the ages" tells us that the mystery has been determined by God and has been in God's heart from the beginning. It is something important to Him, something that relates to the fulfilment of His purposes.

It is helpful for us to look at the context of this verse in 1 Corinthians to appreciate this issue better.

1 Corinthians 1:21, 23-24

21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,

24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

In these verses, Paul tells us that the heart of the gospel message he preaches is Christ crucified. This message about the crucified Christ is a stumbling block to the Jews and it is foolishness to the Greeks. But in reality, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The message of the Cross may be foolishness to the world, but it is in fact a manifestation of God's wisdom.

1 Corinthians 2:1-8

1 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.

2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

4 And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

5 that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

6 Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away;

7 but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory;

8 the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory;

Paul says he did not proclaim the gospel "with superiority of speech or of wisdom" (v. 1). He says, on the contrary, that he came in weakness, in fear and with much trembling (v. 3). He is not saying that his words were not wise. Rather, he is saying that he was not speaking persuasive words of human wisdom. He was not using his own wisdom or the wisdom of this age (vs. 4-6).

Paul says "we do speak wisdom among those who are mature" (v. 6). By this, he is saying that the wisdom he spoke with is true wisdom. It is wisdom for those who are truly mature, wisdom that comes from above, wisdom that clearly demonstrates the power of the Spirit (v. 4). It is God's wisdom, but God's wisdom in a mystery (v. 7). God has "predestined it before the ages". He has prepared it from the very beginning. However, it has been "hidden wisdom" for a long time until the coming of Christ. Even with the coming of Christ, the rulers of this age do not understand it; otherwise they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (v. 8).

1 Corinthians 2:9-10

9 but just as it is written,

"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,

And which have not entered the heart of man,

All that God has prepared for those who love Him."

10 For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.

In verse 9, quoting the prophet Isaiah, Paul tells us how glorious this mystery is. He says these are "things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man". The meaning is that God has abundantly prepared spiritual riches for us. He prepared them "for those who love Him". This is what God intends and desires for us.

We cannot understand God's mystery by human cleverness, human wisdom or human diligence. We can understand it only through God's revelation. Yes, having a right attitude is important. But ultimately, God has to reveal. Verse 10 tells us that the Spirit of God, who knows all that is in the heart of God, will reveal to us all the treasures God has prepared for us from the beginning. These are "the riches of the glory of this mystery".

4. *"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (v. 27)*

How can the riches of the glory of this mystery become ours? Verse 27 provides the answer. It is "Christ in you, the hope of glory". Through receiving Christ into our hearts, Christ now dwells in us. This is how we can attain to the spiritual wealth that God has prepared for us. This is how the glorious purposes of God will be fulfilled in and through Christ – by Christ dwelling within us.

5. *"every man complete in Christ" (v. 28)*

This verse tells us that every man may be "complete in Christ". The word "complete" can also be translated as "mature". So Paul is saying that every man has the potential to be mature in Christ. This is an important goal that God wants to achieve – that there be men and women created in the image of God who attain to moral and spiritual stature. This is at the heart of Paul's ministry – to present every man mature in Christ. To that end, Paul proclaims Christ, "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom".

Growth in moral and spiritual stature enables believers to experience in increasing measure all the spiritual wealth God intends for us. It also enables us to participate more fully and effectively in the advancement of God's kingdom and in the fulfilment of His purposes.

6. *"every man complete in Christ" (v. 28)*

The phrase "in Christ" comes up very often in Ephesians and again here in this verse. When we repent and trust in the Lord, God places us in Christ. It is by God's doing that we are in Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 1:30). Christ in us and we in Christ – these are the key spiritual realities on the basis of which God seeks to fulfil His eternal purpose. I mention "on the basis of which" because even though Christ is in us and

we are in Christ when we become Christians, it does not mean all believers will become mature or attain to all the wealth that God intends for us. If we respond well to God's call, it is feasible to enter into them progressively. And it is on the basis of "Christ in us and we in Christ" that God will lead us towards maturity and bring about increasing attainment of all the spiritual riches and reality God intends for us.

7. *"a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself" (2:2)*

In Colossians 2:2, Paul talks about "a true knowledge of God's mystery", and then he says, "that is, Christ Himself". In the next verse, he says: "in whom (Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). This shows us clearly that Christ is central to the mystery. We have seen that it is through Christ that God fulfils His eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11).

8. *"all the wealth" (2:2)*

In Colossians 2:1-3, Paul tells us about his struggle on behalf of the believers, so that they may attain to "all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself". Note the phrase "all the wealth". This is not referring to earthly wealth, but to true riches from the perspective of God's kingdom. This includes all the wealth that God intends for us.

But how can we attain to this wealth? By having "the full assurance of understanding". Understanding is extremely important, but it is not just mental understanding. It is understanding that results "in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself". It is understanding that is associated with an experiential knowledge of Christ. To have this kind of true knowledge of God's mystery is to enter into the reality of what is in God's heart. And this is possible only in and through Christ.

9. *"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf...that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself" (2:1-2)*

In this passage, we see the direction and goal of Paul's ministry. Paul is striving so that all believers may be mature in Christ (1:27-28). He is striving so that they may attain to all the wealth that God intends for them (2:1-2).

God's mystery is at the heart of Paul's ministry. Paul sees himself as a steward of this mystery (Col. 1:25). He wants to faithfully discharge this stewardship. For this he is prepared to suffer. He is not only prepared to suffer; he says: "I rejoice in my sufferings" (Col 1:24). He rejoices in his sufferings on behalf of the body of Christ. In his labour and striving, he does so according to God's power working mightily within him (Col. 1:29).

And at the end of his life, Paul was able to testify that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision and that a crown of righteousness awaited him. This can also be true for each one of us and for us together as God's people. And it would be wonderful if this could indeed materialise.

But first, we too must have a heavenly vision. We must understand more clearly what is in God's heart. What are His purposes? What are the major issues He is concerned about? All these things have been made known in the Scriptures. May we have the spiritual insight to understand them with clarity.

A parallel in 2 Timothy 1:8-11

What we have just seen in Colossians 1:23-2:3 parallels what Paul says in Ephesians 3 and also 2 Timothy 1:8-11. You will find the same key issues reflected in 2 Timothy 1:8-11. Although Paul talks about many things in his epistles, these are the central issues he is concerned about and which he laboured for.

2 Timothy 1:8-11

8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God,

9 who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,

10 but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel,

11 for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle and a teacher.

Here, we see again the theme of Paul suffering for the gospel. Paul is not ashamed of the Lord or of his own imprisonment.

Paul tells us that God saved us and called us, not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace. God's purpose is being fulfilled in Christ. But what God has purposed for us in Christ did not begin only with the coming of Christ. It has been in God's heart right from the beginning. But in the fullness of time, He sent Christ, and make known to us what He has granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.

God called Paul to be a preacher and an apostle and a teacher of the gospel. And Paul sought to do his utmost to fulfil what God has entrusted to him.

"The mystery" in 1 Timothy 3:16

Let us now look at a phrase in 1 Timothy 3:16 that may not be easy for us to appreciate if we do not understand what the mystery is. The phrase is: "great is the mystery of godliness".

1 Timothy 3:16

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness:
He who was revealed in the flesh,
Was vindicated in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Proclaimed among the nations,
Believed on in the world,
Taken up in glory.

In this verse, Paul is apparently referring to the common confession of the early believers. What does "great is the mystery of godliness" mean? As we have seen, "the mystery" refers to God's revelation of important truths that have a bearing on the fulfilment of His purposes. "Great" here refers to something that is wonderful. So "great is the mystery of godliness" means God's wonderful revelation to us concerning the issue of godliness.

After saying "great is the mystery of godliness", Paul goes on to talk about "He who was revealed in the flesh". It is reasonably clear that this second part of the verse refers to the Lord Jesus Christ. We can therefore appreciate this verse from the angle that Christ is God's great and wonderful revelation to us concerning the issue of godliness. Christ is the personification of godliness. He is God's revelation to us of what true godliness is. If you want to know what true godliness is, look at the Lord Jesus Christ. Get to know Him. He is true godliness.

We can also appreciate this verse from another angle – the way or the path of godliness. When Paul says "great is the mystery of godliness", he is saying that Christ shows us what true godliness is, and at the same time he is also saying that Christ is the way through which we enter into and attain to godliness. And this is an important provision of God for us, for the fulfilment of His purposes.

We can see a parallel of this way of appreciating the Lord Jesus in John 1:14 and 17. Here, it is not about "godliness", but "grace and truth".

John 1:14

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:17

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

In verse 14, we see the Lord Jesus Christ is full of grace and truth and manifests grace and truth in His life. Verse 17 can be appreciated from two angles. The first is similar in meaning to verse 14, that is, we can see grace and truth in the life of the Lord Jesus because He is full of grace and truth. The second angle of appreciating verse 17 is that the way for us to realise or attain to grace and truth is through the Lord Jesus.

What we see in these two verses in John is similar to what Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:16, where he tells of God's great and wonderful revelation in the Lord Jesus Christ. He tells us that godliness is manifested in the life of Christ. He also tells us that the way for us to attain godliness is through Christ. Now this is indeed a great and wonderful revelation. This is something truly remarkable. Through the Lord Jesus Christ, weak, frail and sinful people like us can actually attain to godliness.

Godliness is a very important issue to God. It relates to God's character. God's basic concern is that we become godly in our being and ways. This is a recurring theme in all of Paul's epistles. In fact, it is a recurring theme in all of the Scriptures. When we attain to godliness, we attain to moral and spiritual stature. We become mature in Christ.

This understanding of 1 Timothy 3:16 would be in line with what Paul has written in Colossians about the mystery. On the one hand, the mystery is about Christ. He is at the heart of the fulfilment of God's purposes. On the other hand, the mystery is also about the potential of every man to be complete or mature in Christ. Indeed, man attaining to godliness or moral and spiritual stature, and to all the wealth that God intends for us in Christ, are major and related features in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

Concluding remarks

Let us reflect on what the Scriptures reveals to us about the mystery. Faithful stewardship of the mystery is the primary burden in Paul's heart. It is what God has entrusted to him. At the heart of the mystery is the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ, His person and His ministry. The ministry of Christ culminated in the Cross and in His resurrection. On the basis of the Cross, in repentance and faith, we first receive the Lord Jesus into our hearts. It is only then that we can attain to the reality of Christ in us and we in Him.

Let us ask the Lord to search our hearts and help us to order our lives so that the Spirit of God may have the freedom to grant us insight and mould our lives. Let us ask Him to help us attain to our full potential in Christ, the potential of every man being complete or mature in Christ – that we may attain to all the wealth that comes

from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

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