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THE MYSTERY AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND THE CHURCH; SPIRITUAL WARFARE AND SPIRITUAL OPPOSITION

I have been addressing the vital issue: What does the Scriptures have to say about the fulfilment of God's purposes? We have seen how it is important for us to understand what is in God's heart concerning His purposes so we may understand what life is all about and how we can live our lives well. And the way to know all this is to understand what God has revealed in the Scriptures.

We have been looking at a key word in the Scriptures: mystery. This key word can help us understand what is in the heart of God concerning the fulfilment of His purposes.

I now want to consider with you this key word in the context of the relationship between Christ and the church. After that, I will consider with you the subject of spiritual warfare and spiritual opposition. These are two major issues in relation to the fulfilment of God's purposes.

The mystery and the relationship between Christ and the church

Let us turn to Ephesians 5:22-32.

Ephesians 5:22-32

22 Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

23 For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body.

24 But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her,

26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

28 So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;

29 for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church,

30 because we are members of His body.

31 For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.

32 This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.

This passage is often referred to in messages on marriage and on husband and wife relationship. Indeed, it is a passage very relevant to the subject of marriage. But this passage tells us something even more important than the relationship between husband and wife. It tells us what is in God's heart concerning the relationship between Christ and the church and the fulfilment of God's purposes.

If we understand the relationship between Christ and the church, we will be able to better understand what the husband and wife relationship ought to be. In a way, the relationship between husbands and wives is supposed to mirror the relationship between Christ and the church.

In verse 32, Paul says: "This mystery is great". This expression is interpreted by some to refer to the relationship between husband and wife. But actually the primary thrust and significance of this expression has to do with the relationship between Christ and the church. As Paul puts it: "But I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church".

As we have seen in previous messages, this "mystery" refers to what was hidden in times past, but has now, in New Testament times, been revealed to the church. This mystery has to do with God's intention for the church and the nature of the relationship between Christ and the church. When Paul says "this mystery is great", he is saying that this is indeed a marvellous and wonderful revelation.

I now want to highlight from this passage some features of the marvellous revelation concerning the relationship between Christ and the church. Although I will be sharing these features as separate points, they are all closely related.

1. The deep intimate love relationship between Christ and the church

In the heart of God is the deep and intimate love relationship between Christ and the church. The marriage relationship is supposed to reflect this oneness between Christ and the church.

In Ephesians 5:28, Paul says: "So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies". The "ought also" refers to the preceding verses. Verses 25-27 tell us Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, and that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, holy and blameless. Christ loves the church and nourishes and cherishes her because we are members of His body (v.29-30).

In verse 31, Paul talks about oneness in the husband and wife relationship. He says that "a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh". Then he concludes in verse 32 with this statement: "This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church". That is, beyond the intimate love and oneness that God intends for the relationship between husband and wife, there is the intimate love and oneness in the relationship between Christ and the church.

Isn't this incredible? We are so weak, frail, unworthy. Yet God intends that we be one with Christ, the Lord of all creation. He desires us to have an intimate relationship with Christ, the kind of intimacy that is reflected in the relationship between husbands and wives.

But alas, through the ages, the church has fallen far short of this important aspect of what God intends in the fulfilment of His purposes. This calls for sober thought. If we want to be true to God, we must set our heart on seeking to rise up to God's high calling of a deep and intimate relationship with Him. A major goal of this series of messages is to help us move in that direction.

2. We are the body of Christ

In verse 23, Paul tells us that Christ is the head of the church and we are His body. In verse 30, we also read that we are "members of His body". In the first chapter of this epistle, Paul says very much the same thing.

Ephesians 1:22-23

22 And He [*God the Father*] put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him [*the Lord Jesus Christ*] as head over all things to the church,

23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

The church being Christ's body tells us of the spiritual union between Christ and the church. He is the head; we are His body. And Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:23 that we are "the fullness of Him". It is as if Christ is incomplete without us! I said "as if" because Christ is complete in Himself. But in God's plan, in the fulfilment of His eternal purpose, we are to be an essential part of Christ. And as God works out His purposes through Christ, we, being the body of Christ, will also work out God's purposes together with Christ.

Indeed, this mystery is great. What a wonderful revelation! What a privilege God has granted us! It requires spiritual insight to truly appreciate these realities. In the preceding verse 18, Paul wrote about praying for the eyes of the heart to be enlightened in order to properly appreciate what he is saying. Let us pray that the Lord will grant us spiritual insight into the deep spiritual truths He has revealed.

3. We are members of His body

In point 2, we focused on the relationship between Christ and the church – we are His body. Now, we focus on our relationship with one another – we are members of His body (v. 30).

Though each one of us has an individual relationship with Christ, yet together, we are one unit in the spiritual realm. God sees us as one. As members of Christ's body, we complement one another in this spiritual organic reality.

This applies not just to the local congregation, but also to the body of Christ worldwide. Because of the failure to see this reality sufficiently, many problems exist among God's people in different parts of the world and throughout church history. All too often, instead of rejoicing with other Christians who are doing well and contributing to God's kingdom, we are envious and jealous. If we truly appreciate our spiritual oneness, we will not have a spirit of envy, jealousy, strife and competition. Rather, we will complement and support one another. We will help one another so that we can fulfil the function that God has assigned to each one of us.

It is like the human body, a metaphor that Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 12. It is ridiculous for the mouth to be envious of the eye, and for the nose to be jealous of the tongue. Different parts of the body are necessary. They have different functions, and together they contribute to the proper functioning of the total person.

4. The church is subject to Christ in everything

Although there is this intimate love relationship between Christ and the church, for it to work out well, the church must be subject to Christ (v. 24). We cannot live as we wish, according to our inclinations and desires. We have to submit to Him as our head, our Lord. This is a key issue in church life and in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

Because of the church's failure to submit to Christ's lordship, many problems and much complexities arise. The church becomes weak and impoverished. The more the church fails to submit to Christ's lordship, the weaker it will be, and the easier it will be for it to be overcome by the evil one.

So our primary concern should be to have a lively relationship with Christ and to seek to understand what is in His heart, and then to submit to His will and guidance.

If the church is subject to Christ, we will see fewer conflicts and problems in the church. Instead, we will see unity and oneness, peace and harmony. We will be complementing one another, each one doing his or her part as God leads. It will be like an orchestra that plays good music because the musicians are cooperating with the conductor and with one another. There will be healthy growth of every believer and healthy growth of the whole body of Christ. The church will then be able to fulfil

its part well in the outworking of God's purposes as the Lord Jesus will lead and enable us in that direction.

5. Christ is the Saviour of the church

In verse 23, Paul tells us that Christ is "the Saviour of the body". God has provided us full salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation begins with conversion but goes beyond conversion. As we live our Christian life well, we enter more and more into full salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the midst of spiritual attacks and many other difficulties of life, we look to Christ as our Saviour and Deliverer, and in the process, we enter more and more into what God intends for us in the Lord Jesus Christ.

6. Christ loves, nourishes and cherishes the church (vs. 25, 29)

Verse 25 tells us that "Christ also loved the church" and verse 29 tells us that Christ nourishes and cherishes it. We mean much to Him. We are valuable to Him. He loves us at all times. His love for us is not passive. It is one that continually seeks our good, our well-being. Therefore, we who love Him and walk with Him can have the deep assurance of His steadfast love for us.

7. Christ gave Himself up for the church

Verse 25 also tells us that Christ "gave Himself up" for the church. The Cross exemplifies the depth and extent of Christ's love for us. We often think of Christ dying for individuals. While that is correct and biblical, it is not all there is. Verse 25 emphasises not the individual, but the corporate aspect. Christ loved the *church* and gave Himself up for her. In the plan of God, the church has an essential part in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

8. God's goal for the church is sanctification

Ephesians 5:26-27

26 so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,

27 that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

These two verses tell us that Christ is concerned for the moral and spiritual quality of the church. He desires that the church be sanctified, that she be holy and blameless, without any spot or wrinkle. He wants to present to Himself the church in all her glory.

No doubt, Christ has already forgiven us and cleansed us. But we must move towards attaining God's high calling of moral and spiritual beauty. This is God's goal for the church, and it is extremely important in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

Let us turn to Revelations 19:7-9.

Revelation 19:7-9

7 "Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready."

8 It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

9 Then he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

As in Ephesians 5, here in Revelation 19, we see the church in the glory and splendour of moral and spiritual beauty. We read in verse 8: "clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean". This does not refer to physical linen and clothes. This refers to "the righteous acts of the saints".

Some Christians think that righteousness is something that God just gives to us. But the phrase "righteous acts of the saints" suggests otherwise. It suggests that these are righteous acts carried out by righteous people. Yes, we cannot perform righteous acts by our own ability. We need the Lord's enabling. We need to cooperate with Him. Nevertheless, we can term these as our righteous acts.

Many believers are very busily trying to serve God, but may not know what is in God's heart and how they can cooperate with God in attaining His purposes. Ephesians 5:26-27 tell us that God is concerned about the church's moral and spiritual beauty. We must cooperate wholeheartedly with the Lord to attain this goal – beginning with our own life and then contributing to the lives of others and the whole church. Moral, spiritual beauty and stature of every believer and the whole body is the goal as well as the basis for effective service and contribution to God's kingdom.

The mystery and spiritual warfare

The fulfilment of God's purposes takes place in the context of the unceasing opposition of Satan and the powers of darkness. Paul dwells on this subject in Ephesians 6.

Ephesians 6:10-20

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.

11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.

13 Therefore, take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

14 Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,

15 and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

16 in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

17 And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

18 With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints,

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,

20 for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

In the preceding chapters, Paul talks about God's eternal purpose, the church, the relationship between Christ and His church, and how believers ought to live – in their personal life, in the family, in society. In the final chapter, Paul highlights an important reality. He wants us to be mindful of the fact that we fulfil God's purposes in the context of spiritual warfare and strong opposition from the forces of darkness. We must therefore be strong in the Lord (v. 10).

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood

Our struggle is not "against flesh and blood" (v. 12). The difficulties we face in our Christian life and service cannot simply be attributed to circumstances and to people. Often, behind the difficulties we face are the powers of darkness at work.

Putting on the full armour of God

Thus, Paul warns us of the need to put on the full armour of God (vs. 10, 11, 13). As we look at Paul's description of the armour, we will realise that he is referring to major areas of moral and spiritual qualities and stature – girding our loins with truth; putting on the breastplate of righteousness; having our feet shod with the preparation of the readiness of the gospel of peace, taking up the shield of faith, wearing the helmet of salvation and wielding the sword of the Spirit.

Importance of prayer

In the context of spiritual warfare, Paul highlights the importance of prayer. Prayer must undergird every aspect of our lives and our concern for the brethren: "With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints" (v. 18).

Importance of prayer support from others

Paul knew that, in the context of spiritual opposition, prayer support is very important for ministry to be effective. Accordingly, he requests: "Pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me" (v. 19). He also requests for prayer that he might make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, "for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (v. 20).

The mystery and spiritual warfare in 2 Thessalonians 2

Paul also refers to the reality of spiritual opposition in 2 Thessalonians 2:7-10. In this passage, he again uses the word "mystery". In the context of this passage, it is clear that Paul is talking about the Second Coming of Christ.

2 Thessalonians 2:7-10

7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.

8 Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

9 that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,

10 and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

The meaning of "the mystery of lawlessness"

It is not uncommon for people to interpret "the mystery of lawlessness" to mean the subject of lawlessness is mysterious. But, as we have already seen, Paul often uses "mystery" to refer to important truths that God has revealed in relation to the outworking of His purposes, truths which we can understand only with spiritual insight.

In line with that usage, "the mystery of lawlessness" is likely a reference to the satanic opposition he mentions in verse 9: "the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan". If we read through the whole passage, we will see that the flow of the passage is about Satan at work, and a major manifestation and goal of satanic activity is lawlessness and the promotion of lawlessness. God wants us to

know that perceiving the role of Satan is essential for an accurate understanding of the manifestations of lawlessness.

Although the evil one has always been at work to promote lawlessness and wickedness, in the last days, this will be intensified. This is a reality we have to bear in mind as we seek to be faithful to God and serve Him well in the last days.

The "lawless one"

So Paul is saying here that the mystery of lawlessness is already at work, and behind it is Satan. But there is a restraining factor. "Only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way" (v. 7). The evil one and what he is seeking to do is being restrained until the one who is restraining is taken out of the way. Then that "lawless one" will be revealed. The lawless one is likely to be a reference to the anti-Christ. The manifestation and activity of the lawless one, the anti-Christ, will be a significant event and strategy of Satan in his opposition to God's purposes. Through the anti-Christ, Satan will seek to promote lawlessness, wickedness and deception in the last days. What he will do is revealed in greater detail in the Book of Revelation. When Christ appears again, He will slay the lawless one, the anti-Christ, with the breath of His mouth (v. 8).

Deception

Then we read in verses 9 and 10: "With all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved". This tells us that a major strategy the evil one uses to tear down God's work is deception. It is important therefore that we understand the strategy of the evil one and learn how to counter him.

Concluding remarks

In this message, we have seen how the key word "mystery" helps us recognise two major issues in the outworking of God's purposes: the relationship between Christ and the church, and spiritual warfare.

Let us reflect on what is in God's heart for the church and also for our personal lives. The Lord Jesus gave Himself up for the church that He might sanctify her and present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

Let us reflect on how we can wholeheartedly cooperate with the Lord in attaining to this goal. Let us consider this at both the personal and corporate levels – each one of us growing in moral and spiritual stature, and together as the church, growing in the splendour and glory of moral and spiritual beauty.

Let us be assured of Christ's love for the church and for us at a personal level. He loves us, cherishes us and nourishes us. But we must submit to His lordship. We must live by the guidance and empowering of the Holy Spirit. Only then can there be peace and harmony in the body. Only then can there be the proper working of each individual part. Only then will there be healthy growth of every member and the whole body.

We live in a context of strong spiritual opposition. Thus, we need to be strong in the Lord and to put on the full armour of God. We must gird our loins with truth. We must put on the breastplate of righteousness. Our feet must be shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace. We must take up the shield of faith. We must wear the helmet of salvation. And we must wield the sword of the Spirit. We must not be ignorant of the wiles of the evil one. Instead, we must be prayerful and be upholding one another in prayer.

This warfare cannot be waged merely at the personal level. We must also learn to fight the good fight of faith at the corporate level, as a well-equipped army, under the headship of Christ.

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