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THE MYSTERY AND THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PURPOSES – A CONSOLIDATED PICTURE

Introduction

In the first message in this series, I considered with you the importance of knowing the answers to the basic, fundamental issues of life:

- What is life all about?
- How should we live?
- What should be our goals in life?
- What should we concentrate upon?
- How can we live a life that is truly satisfying and fulfilling?
- On what should we channel our time, energy and resources?

As believers in God, we know that the answers to all these questions lie with God. We cannot come up with our own answers; neither can we look to other people for answers. We must look to God because He is the One who has created us. Like a master planner, He has a marvellous plan for our eternal well-being. Therefore, to understand how we should live, we need to look to Him.

The apostle Paul tells us that "all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The Scriptures speaks on many important issues like prayer, fellowship, reading the Scriptures. But where do all these fit into God's master plan? Is it possible for us to see God's big picture in the Scriptures? I believe it is. It is possible for us to see the big picture, and to have an integrated approach to life, an approach that encompasses both the major issues and the minor details of everyday life. And this is what I am seeking to consider with you in this series of messages on the fulfilment of God's purposes.

In the second message, I started looking at a keyword in the Scriptures that can help us understand what is in the heart of God concerning the fulfilment of His purposes. This key word is "mystery".

It seems to me that, in His sovereignty, God has so undertaken that there is this word "mystery" in the Scriptures, in the epistles of Paul and the teachings of Christ,

that can enable us to link together the major issues relating to God's big picture. And the major issues include:

- How God intends His eternal purpose to be fulfilled
- The depth and richness of life that God intends for mankind and how it 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 and the attainment of moral and spiritual stature of every man in Christ
- Believers will have a wonderful body that is appropriate for God's eternal kingdom – a spiritual body that is immortal, glorious and powerful
- God's intention and goal for the church
- The role and significance of the church in the fulfilment of God's purposes
- The relationship between Christ and the church
- The central place of the kingdom of God and the issues relating to God's kingdom and the fulfilment of God's purposes
- The heart of Paul's ministry, that which he laboured and strived for, and which we should seek to do likewise
- The meaning of the communication of the gospel in all its width and depth
- Spiritual, satanic opposition to the fulfilment of God's purposes
- The heart of God's revelation
- The life of faith

In the preceding four messages, I have sought to substantiate all this.

I will now put in a more coherent form what we have covered in the preceding four messages. In other words, I will try to give you a consolidated picture.

A consolidated picture

1. The mystery and the fulfilment of God's purposes

The apostle Paul often uses the word "mystery" with reference to important truths about the fulfilment of God's purposes. These truths can be known only through God's revelation, and only as God gives us spiritual insight into them.

This word "mystery" is like a golden thread that helps to weave together the major strands of the fulfilment of God's purposes into a coherent picture. It shows us not only what God's purposes are, but also how they can be attained and fulfilled.

Hidden in ages past, but now manifested

In Romans 16:25-26, Paul tells us that the mystery "has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested ..." Matthew 13:11 makes it clear to us that this revelation was made when the Lord Jesus Christ came into this world. He told His disciples: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven". In the person of the Lord Jesus, in His teaching, preaching, and the parables that He told, He was helping them to understand the mysteries about God's kingdom.

Fuller revelation to the apostles

Although the Lord Jesus taught much about the kingdom of God, there is fuller revelation after His ascension, in particular, to and through the apostle Paul. In Ephesians 3:3, Paul mentions how "by revelation there was made known to me the mystery". In verses 4 and 5, he talks about "my insight into the mystery of Christ, 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".

Revealed in the fullness of time

God revealed the mystery to people in the New Testament times, not because they were more righteous than those in Old Testament times, but because in His sovereignty, God decided that the time was right for Him to begin revealing the mystery. In the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The mystery is very important and precious

The Lord Jesus told His disciples: "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear ... 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" (Matt. 13:16-17). This tells us that the mystery is very important and precious. It is indeed a privilege for believers in New Testament times to receive such revelations.

We can also appreciate the significance and the preciousness of the mystery when we see it occupying the heart of Paul's ministry. For it, Paul laboured and strived. For it, Paul was prepared to suffer (Col. 1:24-29).

God's eternal purpose

The mystery has to do with the eternal purpose of God which He carried out in Christ. We saw this in Ephesians 3:11. Paul was talking about his insight into the mystery, and about the manifold wisdom of God being made known through the church, and then he said: "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He (God) carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord". So it has to do with God's eternal purpose, which encompasses the present and the future, right into eternity.

God's eternal purpose has to do with His kingdom. Only God's eternal kingdom and what is of God will abide. All else on this earth are temporary and will perish. Only those who are in Christ will have a part in God's eternal kingdom.

2. The mystery: In God's heart from the very beginning

The mystery, though revealed with the coming of the Lord Jesus and during New Testament times, has been in the heart of God from the very beginning. It was in His heart before the foundation of the world.

In Ephesians 1:3-4, Paul tells us how God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him". Paul is talking about what has been in the heart of God even before the foundation of the world. And then in verses 8 and 9, he says: "In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him". So God has already made plans for us and He has made known to us the mystery of His will, His kind intention towards us in Christ Jesus.

In verse 10, Paul goes on to say: "With a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ". This verse indicates to us the centrality of the role of Christ in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

3. The mystery is rich and glorious

Paul describes the mystery as "the riches of the glory of this mystery" (Col. 1:27). These are weighty words. As it is, the word "glory" would have suggested to us that the mystery is something marvellous and wonderful. But Paul deems it inadequate a description. So he uses the phrase, "the riches of the glory of this mystery" to tell us just how rich and glorious the mystery is. Such riches and glory is not the kind that men could conjure up. It is riches and glory from the eternal perspective. It is riches and glory of God's kind intention towards us in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the kind of glory that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 2:7-10.

In 1 Corinthians 2:7, Paul says: "We speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory". It was something hidden, something which God has predestined before the ages, even before the foundation of the earth, to our glory.

Paul then elaborates in verse 9, telling us that these are "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". God has much in store for us, much that He intends for us in His plans and purposes. He has now revealed them to us through the Spirit (v. 10).

4. Christ in you, the hope of glory

How can we enter into the riches of the glory of this mystery that Paul tells us about in Colossians 1:27? How can this become a reality? The words that follow tell us how.

Colossians 1:27

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.

“Christ in you, the hope of glory”. Christ in us – this is one aspect of the spiritual reality.

The other aspect of the spiritual reality has to do with what we are and what we have in Christ. We have looked at Ephesians 1, where Paul again and again talks about believers being in Christ and about God's blessings and intentions for us in Him.

So these two aspects of spiritual reality – Christ in us and we in Him – form the basis whereby God seeks to fulfil His eternal purpose. He seeks to bring it about through Christ and in and through our lives.

*5. Potential for moral and spiritual development***Colossians 1:28**

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

This verse shows us that there is potential in every man to be complete or mature in Christ.

In Ephesians 4:13, we see a similar thrust:

Ephesians 4:13

until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Here, Paul speaks of believers attaining “to the unity of the faith, to a mature man”, to “the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ”. This is what God has in His heart for all of us and it is an important aspect of the mystery.

That we attain to a high level of moral and spiritual stature is an end in itself. It is also a means by which God fulfils His purposes. It is as we grow in moral, spiritual stature that we will be able to enter into deep fellowship with God and effectively cooperate with Him, labour together with Him and contribute to the fulfilment of His purposes.

Attained through healthy church life

All this is attained in the context of the healthy outworking of church life, which Paul explains in the preceding verses. God gives gifts to the church – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – “for the equipping of the saints for the work of

service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:12-13). This is also in the context of "the proper working of each individual part" (Eph. 4:16).

God's intention for all

Paul tells us another important aspect of the mystery in Ephesians 3:6 – that all true believers are fellow heirs, fellow members of the body of Christ and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ through the gospel. In the eyes of God, we are all precious. We all have vast potential for moral and spiritual development in the Lord Jesus Christ.

All that God intends for man in the Lord Jesus Christ is available to all mankind. All are welcome and all can move in that direction, whoever you may be. The Lord Jesus is calling all to Himself: "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The Lord Jesus wants us, as His disciples, to participate in helping others to turn to Him. It is in Him that man can rise up to the highest and fullest level of attainment, of meaning, of quality in their lives. It is only in Him that they can participate in what God intends for mankind.

Do not harden our heart

But if we do not respond to God's high calling, we would not have a meaningful part in His purposes. It is possible for us to reject God's purposes for our lives, just as the lawyers and Pharisees had rejected God's purposes for their lives (Luke 7:30). We can harden our hearts, we can become distracted, we can pursue other things that are more attractive to the flesh, but it will be a great loss. Even more seriously, if we move away from the light and the path of life in the Lord Jesus Christ, we will move towards darkness and destruction.

Follow the example of Paul

Paul was so deeply impressed with the riches of the glory of the mystery that he devoted his whole life and gave all he had towards the faithful stewardship of the mystery. He spared no effort to help believers gain insight into all that is in God's heart, into all that God has revealed pertaining to the mystery, so they may experience it in all its fullness.

Let us follow the example of the apostle Paul. Let us earnestly seek to gain deep insight into the riches of the glory of the mystery and experience the abundant life in Christ that God intends for us, and faithfully transmit these truths to others.

6. Christ at the heart of the mystery

Colossians 2:2

... 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,

As Paul talks about his struggle to help believers attain to "all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God's mystery", he added the words: "that is, Christ Himself".

At the very heart of God's revelation, at the very heart of God's mystery, at the very heart of the fulfilment of God's purposes, is the Lord Jesus Christ. This comes through to us again and again. Though Christ died on the Cross for our sins, His death is not just for forgiveness of sins, or to release us from bondage to the powers of darkness, or to overcome sin and the evil one. His death is also that we may attain to all the wealth that God intends for us in Him, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

In Ephesians 1:3, Paul tells us that God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ". This is a spiritual reality. The blessings are already bestowed upon us. True believers are in Christ and every spiritual blessing is in Him and is intended for us.

It is important for us to appreciate the significance of the role of Christ in the fulfilment of God's purposes. It permeates every aspect – from enabling us to be forgiven of our sins to being the foundation of our faith. And as we continue to grow in the Lord, it is always in Christ. All the riches and wealth that God intends for us, they are all found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So a very major aspect of the revelation of the mystery is Christ Himself – the person of Christ, His role, His coming into this world, His preaching, His teaching and His death and what was accomplished at the Cross. Not only that, His resurrection and the meaning and implications of the risen Christ in our lives.

Even as we grow in our appreciation of the significance of the Cross and the implications of the death of Christ, we must not forget the significance of the meaning of the risen Christ. Without the risen Christ, there will not be "Christ in you, the hope of glory".

7. The manifold wisdom of God being made known through the church

In Ephesians 3:8-9, Paul talks about "the unfathomable riches of Christ" and bringing to light "what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things". Then in verse 10, he says: "so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church". The "so that" indicates the goal, the direction. In verse 11, he goes on to say: "this was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ".

These three verses tell us that it is God's eternal purpose to bring to light the administration of the mystery, and it is through the church that God's manifold wisdom will be made known.

When the church rises up to God's high calling and body-life functions well, she will fulfil a crucial role in the outworking of God's purposes and many facets of God's wisdom will be manifested. One aspect is to make known God's manifold wisdom "to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). So the implications and significance are not limited to the human dimension, but extend to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm, to the angelic beings and the powers of darkness.

A church that fulfils God's high calling will have impact on angelic beings and the powers of darkness. It will have a part in resolving the problem of the rebellion of Satan and the powers of darkness, which took place before the creation of man. This area of truth will be considered in greater detail in P074-079.

8. The mystery and the relationship between Christ and the church

A marvellous revelation

In Ephesians 5:32, Paul tells us this mystery is great and he says: "I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church".

In the preceding verses 22-31, Paul describes important aspects of the beautiful relationship between Christ and the church. In verse 32 he sums it up by telling us that this is a great or marvellous revelation of what has been hidden in the heart of God – the spiritual union and the deep, intimate love relationship between Christ and the church. And the marriage relationship between a man and a woman is meant to reflect such oneness that God desires.

Christ is the Saviour and head of the church, His body, the fullness of Him

Christ is the Saviour of the body and the head of the church (v. 23), which is His body (vs. 23, 30) and the fullness of Him. That is, the body of Christ, the church, is the fullness of Christ. It is as if Christ is incomplete without us! We are part of Him and we form the fullness of Him.

We are members of His body

"We are members of His body" (v. 30), has this important implication that together we are one unit in the spiritual realm. As one unit in this great spiritual organic reality, as members of the body of Christ, we are meant to complement one another. There is no place for strife, envy, jealousy, improper comparison, or an unhealthy competitive spirit. With a common direction, a common goal, a common purpose, we are to work together and support one another.

This is not just true of the local church. It is also true of the universal church. Together we form the body of Christ. The proper functioning of each individual part in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:16) can also be appreciated from the angle of the universal church. The various groups of believers in different parts of the world are not meant to compete against but to complement one another for the great task that God has entrusted to His people. There is no place for strife, envy, jealousy in the universal church. We must all align our hearts with God's heart, be concerned with

what He is concerned about, and in whatever way we can, we must support and uphold one another.

We must not do anything that will hurt the body of Christ, whether it is at the level of the local church or the level of the universal church. Whenever anything is amiss, just as it grieves the Spirit of God, it must also grieve our hearts. And whatever is positive that is going on in any part of the world and in the local context, we must truly rejoice. There is only one God, one universal church, one body of Christ. We have a common purpose, a common direction and a common enemy. And we are all moving in the same direction of the fulfilment of God's purposes.

The church ought to be subject to Christ in everything

And as the body of Christ, the church is to be subject to Christ in everything (v. 24). We cannot act as we see fit, according to our own inclinations, desires and ambition. Christ is our Lord. In the outworking of church life, in the fulfilment of God's purposes, submission to Christ is extremely important. It is the answer to the spiritual poverty of the church. It is the solution to all kinds of problems that are in the church of God.

Our primary focus must be to submit to the lordship of Christ and earnestly seek to understand what is in the heart of God for our own lives and also for God's people. As we learn to find and fulfil our proper place in the body of Christ, there will be peace and harmony and the proper working of each individual part. This will result in the healthy growth of every believer and the whole body of Christ.

Christ gave Himself up for the church

Paul also tells us that Christ gave Himself up for the church (v. 25). Not for individuals alone, but for the church. In the heart of God, the church and the healthy outworking of church life fulfil a vital role in the fulfilment of His purposes.

Christ loves, nourishes and cherishes the church

Christ loves the church, and He nourishes and cherishes it (vs. 25, 29). If we love the Lord, we must also love His people and His church and seek to contribute our part in the same direction as Christ nourishing and cherishing the church.

"Christ loved the church" also assures us of the depth of His love. Because of His steadfast love towards us, because He loved us so much that He gave Himself for the church, we can have deep confidence in Him.

So as we consecrate our lives to the building of the kingdom of God and the church of God, we can have confidence that together with the Lord, our effort will not be futile. Yes, we may face many obstacles. Yes, many things may go wrong. And yes, we may even go astray. But we need not be deterred or lose heart. If we love Him and seek to walk with Him, we can have proper confidence that He will guide us, lead us, and bring us back, even if we go astray. If we persevere in the path of truth, our labour in the Lord will not be in vain.

9. Christ's goal for the church – that she might be sanctified and glorious

Christ's intention, His goal for the church, is that the church be sanctified (Eph. 5:26), and that the church might be presented in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless (Eph. 5:27). This is closely related to God's intention for the individual believer. God wants individual believers to attain to all the wealth in Christ and the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. His concern is moral, spiritual stature of individual believers and also moral, spiritual stature of the church.

And so, this is what we must set our hearts upon. We must cooperate wholeheartedly with the Lord in the attaining of the goal of healthy growth of every believer and the whole body of Christ.

10. All true believers will be changed

In relation to the mystery, Paul also tells us all true believers will be changed.

1 Corinthians 15:51

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

We will be changed from flesh and blood, from a natural body, which is perishable and weak, to what is appropriate for the kingdom of God, a spiritual body, which is imperishable, glorious and powerful and immortal (vs. 50, 43, 44, 54).

How we live has eternal significance

For those in Christ, the problem of death because of sin will be resolved and their toil in the Lord will not be in vain. Their toil will have abiding significance (vs. 54-58). There is life beyond the grave, and how we live our lives will have eternal significance.

Paul also tells us in Ephesians 2:7 that there is much that awaits all who respond positively to God's call. In the ages to come, God will show us "the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus".

So let us constantly live with the consciousness of the eternal dimension. Let us realise that how we live our lives on earth, how we respond to God, how we learn and grow, will have a crucial bearing, not only on how we can participate in the fulfilment of God's purposes on earth, but also on what awaits us in eternity.

11. Leading to obedience of faith

Paul closes the Epistle of Romans with these words:

Romans 16:25-27

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;
27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

These few verses are very rich in meaning and they help us appreciate various aspects regarding the mystery.

The gospel, the preaching of Christ, and the mystery

The gospel, the preaching of Christ and the mystery are closely related. True preaching of the gospel centres on Christ and on God's provisions and intentions for us in Christ. This is at the heart of the revelation of the mystery (v. 25).

The mystery is manifested in the Scriptures

Paul tells us the mystery, kept secret for long ages past, is now manifested. And an aspect of its manifestation is in the Scriptures: "by the Scriptures of the prophets" or "the prophetic Scriptures" (v. 26).

Life of faith and obedience to what God has revealed about the mystery

In verse 26, we read that the mystery is to be made known to all the nations, "leading to obedience of faith". This tells us that at the heart of the life of faith is obedience to what God has revealed about the mystery.

In 1 Timothy 3:9, Paul speaks along a similar line, when he uses the words "the mystery of the faith". In that context, Paul tells us that a characteristic of deacons is those "holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience". That is, at the heart of the Christian faith and a life of faith is obedience to what God has revealed in relation to the mystery, which is directly related to the fulfilment of God's purposes.

So all these – the communication of the mystery, the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of Christ – are meant to lead to the obedience of faith, which in turn will result in the building up and the advancement of God's kingdom

12. Faithful stewardship of the mystery

God has entrusted to us the mystery, and we need to be faithful stewards of the mystery.

In Ephesians 3:3-4, the apostle Paul spoke about his stewardship of the mystery. In 1 Corinthians 4:1-2, he talked about being "stewards of the mysteries of God" and

that as stewards, there is a need to be "found trustworthy". And then in Colossians 1:24-25, he said that as a faithful steward, he rejoiced in his sufferings for the sake of others, so that he might "fully carry out the word of God", the mystery.

Just as Paul laboured and strived according to God's power in fulfilling his stewardship of the mystery (Col. 1:29), we must learn to do likewise. It is a great privilege and also a great responsibility. In the fullness of time, God has revealed the secrets of His heart. And He has entrusted to us, individually and corporately, this grave responsibility of communicating His whole message.

13. Spiritual warfare and prayer

The fulfilment of God's purposes takes place in the context of the unceasing opposition of Satan and the powers of darkness. Paul reminds us of this in Ephesians 6:10-20.

In verse 10, he says: "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might". In verse 11, he stresses the need for us to put on the whole armour of God so we may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. Then in verse 18, he says:

Ephesians 6:18

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,

Notice the strong emphasis on prayer. Prayer is associated with moving the sword of the Spirit (v. 17). And then in verse 19 Paul says:

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,

Paul was very concerned about being faithful in the stewardship of the mystery in the light of spiritual opposition and spiritual warfare. And so, he requested for prayers. As all of us are also to participate in the communication of the mystery of the gospel, we too must recognise the importance of prayer and putting on the whole armour of God.

Without prayer, we cannot be effective in making known the mystery of the gospel. This whole endeavour to fulfil the purposes of God must be undergirded by prayer. It must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit and in fellowship with God. The spiritual dimension of prayer is indeed extremely important.

Paul also referred to the reality of satanic opposition in a difficult passage which has the word "mystery" – 2 Thessalonians 2:7-10. In this passage, we learn that Satan is the one behind the promotion of lawlessness, wickedness and deception. This has been true since the creation of man, and it has intensified in the last days, and will culminate in the activity of the anti-Christ, the lawless one. Satan himself is working hard behind the scene to promote all forms of lawlessness, wickedness and deception.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, to be faithful and effective servants of the Lord, we must seek to gain insight into "the riches of the glory of this mystery" (Col. 1:27). We must ask God to help us understand and appreciate in all its richness and glory what He has revealed in the Scriptures.

And as we understand, we must align our hearts with God's heart. And we must seek to work out and fulfil all that God intends, properly and meaningfully participating in the communication of the full gospel, leading to the obedience of faith, in all its richness, at the personal level and also together as God's people.

If we are able to go through this process well, we will enter deeper into God's heart, and our spirit will be more one with the Lord, and we will be able to participate more fully in the fulfilment of God's purposes. This is what life is all about. This is a great privilege and also a grave responsibility.

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