10-14-18

Ephesians 3:1-13 (2)

We looked at these verses last week and found that Paul covered three main topics: his own part in God’s plan to spread the Gospel, the mystery that God had kept hidden from the beginning of time, and how God’s wisdom is being revealed through this mystery. These ideas are interwoven throughout these verses. We talked before about Paul’s part in being made an apostle of Jesus Christ, and that his specific mission was to the Gentiles. Paul is in absolute awe that God has chosen him for this office. He thinks back to his previous way of life in which he severely persecuted the church and thereby persecuted Jesus Himself. Yet he was chosen to carry the good news of the Gospel to those who desperately needed it; those who were outside the covenant people of God.

Today we will look at the mystery that was revealed at just the right time. As we will see later, Paul is actually discussing two mysteries in this section; or perhaps, one overall mystery and then a specific part of the mystery. The primary mystery is God summing all things up in Jesus Christ. The specific part that Paul looks at here is the combining of Jews and Gentiles into one people in Christ.

There is actually a slightly different meaning between our English word “mystery” and the Greek word that it translates: mysterion. The word “mystery” tends to have a dark connotation. Something happened and we don’t know what or why. Sometimes we can figure out what happened and then we say “the mystery is solved”.

Mysterion closely resembles a secret. It is knowledge that is kept hidden. It often came up in the Pagan religions. These religions kept some kind of secret knowledge that would only be shared with members when they reached a certain level within the religion. The Pagan religions were contrary to the mysterion of God.

The mystery Paul speaks of was knowledge that was kept hidden by God since before He created the world. It goes without saying that if God has hidden it, we will never be able to find it nor figure it out. The difference is that God kept it hidden until the proper time and then revealed it. Once revealed, the mystery was available to everybody and is now known by His entire church.

In verse 3, Paul tells us that he wrote of this mystery before in brief. He is referring back to chapter 1 verses 9 and 10.

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

This is the overarching plan of God; it is His will to bring everything together in His Son, Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament, the Jews knew that they were the chosen people of God. They knew that the nation of Israel belonged to God. They knew that at some point in time a Messiah was coming. But they pictured that Messiah only as a conquering King; someone who would rule over the nation and lead it to defeat all her enemies.

The prophets also foretold that this Messiah would suffer and would first come as a suffering servant. For the most part, the Jews missed this. But even with this information, no one would have been able to figure out how God planned to bring everything together in this Messiah; and certainly, nobody did. But when the Messiah came, it was God’s timing to let the mystery be known; it was time to reveal the secret.

As Paul says in verse 3, the mystery was made known to him by revelation. It had to be this way. Studying the Old Testament would not have revealed what God had in mind; it was hidden. Paul was spoken to directly by the Lord Jesus Christ. This certainly took place on the road to Damascus that we read about in Acts 9. It is also possible that Paul had later revelations given to him by Christ. It is very important to know that Paul was taught by Jesus Himself. He didn’t have anything explained to him by the apostles. His knowledge came from God, not from man; this gives him his status as an apostle.

We learn more about how important revelation is in Romans 1:20.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

Here we see that God has reveled Himself, to some extent, in nature. If we look at everything around us, the only reasonable conclusion is that it was all made and the One who made it had to be God. Obviously, sinful mankind stops at the created and worships it or comes up with other ideas so as not to be responsible to God; but as we are told, there is no excuse for these thoughts.

So, from creation, we can (and should) figure out that there is God. However, there isn’t any way to figure out Jesus. And Jesus is important because He is the only way to eternal life. Jesus has to be revealed. He has to be explained to us and the Holy Spirit must work in our hearts to give us faith in Him. The mystery of God bringing all things together in Jesus Christ was supernaturally revealed to Paul and the other apostles, so that they could in turn tell everybody else. Again, it’s not hidden any more, the good news is out there for everybody.

The last part of verse 3 and all of verse 4 are an aside in what Paul is writing. “(A)s I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ.” The King James Version actually has this section in parenthesis, which helps to point this out. What we end up with is a mystery in general and then Paul talks about a sub-mystery, or a particular part of the mystery of Christ. So, Paul is saying that we can refer back to what he wrote in chapter 1 about the mystery to learn about the Father’s plan to bring all things together in Christ.

In verse 5, Paul has moved to the specific part of the mystery; of how the Gentiles were to be brought in. He tells us of this mystery “which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men”. It is reasonable for us to ask how this was not made known; the Old Testament mentions salvation for the Gentiles several times. Paul sites Genesis 12:3 when he writes Galatians 3:8.

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, “All the nations will be blessed in you.”

Abraham, not to mention anyone else who only had access to the Old Testament, would have understood the idea of the Gentiles being blessed somehow; but there isn’t any way to understand the work of Christ that was to come.

Psalm 2:8 is another example.

Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance,  
And the *very* ends of the earth as Your possession.

In this Psalm, God is talking to His Son. At the time this Psalm was written it would have referred to David, but it is a Messianic Psalm. In studying this Psalm, the Jews would have figured this out, but would have taken it as referring to a conquering Messiah. Indeed, it does, but part of that conquering turns out to be the bringing in of the nations with the Israelites to make a people for Jesus.

Turning to the prophets, we read in 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

This is one of the suffering servant prophecies. The Jews, in general, misunderstood these as referring to the prophets who wrote them. They couldn’t imagine their Messiah as anything but a powerful warrior who would be undefeated. In this case, they would have believed that Isaiah was the one suffering (which he did) and that by his writings and prophecies he was a light to the nations (which he is). Again, there is really no way to see what God has planned.

The people of Israel knew that they were to be a light to the nations and that they were to bring others to a knowledge of the one true God. Gentiles could become proselytes. A proselyte is a Gentile who acknowledges Yahweh as the only God and joins Jewish society by submitting to all the laws and customs of the Jews. This was the extent of the Jew’s idea of any Gentile receiving salvation. This was all they could glean from the Old Testament.

Aside from these things, God had another plan all along. It was far more radical than anything the Jews had ever imagined, which made it very difficult for them to accept. It was, however, an unbelievably rich blessing to the Gentiles. It is what Paul reveals in verse 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”. These are all the things Paul spoke of in chapter 2, which come from Jews and Gentiles being made into one new creation. A new people that form the body of Christ.

Two thousand years after this revelation was made to the apostles and prophets of Jesus, the significance of it can be lost on us. It has always been known to us as Christians that we were part of the body of Christ, that we are a new creation in Christ. But we need to make the effort to capture the wonder of this. If God’s plan had stopped with the Mosaic covenant, all of us sitting here would probably be in trouble. The Holy Spirit would not be working on us to turn us to Yahweh. Most of us would not be willing to go through everything it takes to become a proselyte. Those that did, would be living under the burden of the law; those that did not would simply be lost.

But now, we as Christians, are one people with the Jews who have accepted Jesus. As Paul says, we are fellow heirs. We are in line to receive all the vast riches of Christ. These are things more valuable than gold or silver. These are things like assurance of salvation; righteousness; peace, both in this life and eternally; communion with God Himself. Riches that we will never find the end of as we search throughout all of eternity.

We are fellow members of the body. That is the church, the body of Christ. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. God the Father and God the Son recline with us and have communion. We are actual children of God; we can call the Almighty God of the universe our Father. This is the wonderous plan that God had for us all along; but not to be revealed until the proper time.

We are fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel. God’s plan is to sum up all things in Christ. All the promises He has made will be fulfilled in Jesus. The good news of the Gospel is that because we are in Christ, we get to partake of all the promises of God.

When Jesus gave the great commission in Matthew 28:19-20, He told His disciples to go to all the nations. But even then, He didn’t reveal the mystery. They still didn’t understand that Christians would be a new creation. Even when the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost, the revelation didn’t take place. We learn the story of the revelation to the apostle Peter in Acts 10, where he had the vision of all the animals being lowered out of heaven, both clean and unclean, and was told to eat. He was told not to consider anything unclean that God had made. The meaning became clear to him when he witnessed the salvation of the Gentile Cornelius and his family. Peter then revealed this to the others in Jerusalem.

Paul also received revelation, directly from the risen Lord Jesus. It was entirely in God’s timing. As Paul tells us back in Ephesians 3:9, this mystery of a new creation had been hidden in God for all ages. Because it was hidden, we know that it was there all along; it was part of God’s original plan. He truly loves all His creation and desired that they be saved; and in the fullness of time, He made that way known.

Prayer

Help us, LORD, to dwell on the coming of Christ into the world. May Your Holy Spirit make known to our hearts, the great sacrifice made by our precious Saviour Jesus. Reveal to our hearts the love that brought Him to lay aside His heavenly glory and come to the earth as a man. Father, You have revealed Your glory by sending Your Son on our behalf.

We do have some awareness of what has been done for us; we have some comprehension of our sinfulness. Make us more aware of both. In this way we will be able to praise You more as we ought to. Holy Spirit, intercede for us in prayer that we may properly worship the Father and the Son.

We do praise You and thank You Almighty God. Without Your grace, we would be doomed; but You saw fit to rescue us; You set aside our hostility long enough to make a way where there was none. We owe You our eternal lives.

It is in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ we pray

Amen