



Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 17, 2009
Released on, May 13, 2009

“New Revelation in Christ”

Devotional Reading: Isaiah 40:1-11

Background Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-13

Lesson Text: Ephesians 3:1-13

Ephesians 3:1-13

- 1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,
- 2 If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:
- 3 How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words;
- 4 Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ,)
- 5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;
- 6 That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.
- 7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.
- 8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;
- 9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:
- 10 To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,
- 11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:
- 12 In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.
- 13 Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to learn how God has revealed His plan through His Holy Spirit and how Paul was privileged to share in that plan.

Principle: to show that God's plan includes everyone in the world.

Application: to show that new revelation in Christ comes to all His children, for we are all partakers of the same promise.

INTRODUCTION

When you hear the word *mystery*, what comes to mind? Sherlock Holmes? *Masterpiece Theater*? When biblical writers speak of mystery, they do not refer to a fictional story. Rather, they use the word *mystery* much the same way we would use the word *secret*. Thus when they speak of revealing a mystery, they intend to reveal a secret to you.

In New Testament times, the Greeks were known for their *mystery religions*. These were pagan cults that claimed to have secret knowledge of the spirit world. The initiation rites were bizarre. Like kids in a tree house saying, "You can't come in unless you tell us the secret password," members of the cult were those who had the secret knowledge that (supposedly) gained a person the best kind of afterlife. In our passage today, Paul uses the terminology of those cults to highlight God's mystery—the revealed secret—that Paul was called to preach. But unlike those mystery religions, God's revealed secret is available to *all*, not just to a select few. Also unlike those mystery religions, mere possession of certain knowledge isn't enough; it has to be put into practice.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 60

Place: from Rome

We take for granted the fact that a person can become a Christian without converting to Judaism. But that fact wasn't always so clear. In the very earliest days of the church, most Christians were Jews first. The common thought in those earliest days was that Christianity was a variation of Judaism or was a Jewish sect (Acts 24:5, 14).

After all, didn't Jesus Christ come to be the Jewish Messiah, to save God's people from their sins? Jesus made it clear that His message was to go "to the ends of the earth," but many assumed that those wanting to become Christians would have to become Jews first, toeing the line with regard to the Law of Moses. To think of becoming a Christian without becoming a Jew was like someone wanting to become a Kentuckian without becoming an American citizen.

In a vision to Peter in Acts 10, God revealed that Gentiles were not to be considered "unclean." The gospel was open to the Gentiles *without* their having to convert to Judaism. But many in the early church objected to this radical idea. The issue was so hotly debated that the Jerusalem church held a special council just to resolve this issue (Acts 15; compare Galatians 2).

After a long discussion, the apostles confirmed that a Gentile did not have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian. The intervention of the Holy Spirit and the courage of the apostles to be obedient to God's call ensured that Christianity would not be a mere sect of Judaism.

By the time that Paul wrote his letter to the Ephesians, around A.D. 63, the famous Jerusalem Council was more than a decade in the past. The thinking of the church had matured on the issue discussed there. Even so, there was more yet to be said!

THE RECEPTION OF THE REVELATION-Ephesians 3:1-3

1. In what sense was Paul the prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles? (v. 1)

In Ephesians 3:1, Paul called himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ. He found himself imprisoned at Rome for the sake of Christ, but it was also for the sake of the Gentiles. Paul had a special apostolic calling to the Gentiles, and it was this that engendered the Jewish hostility that led to his imprisonment. After the Jewish people attacked Paul in Jerusalem, his case came before Roman tribunals, where he eventually appealed to the emperor. This is why he was at Rome.

Paul is in prison because of his commitment to take *Christ* to the *Gentiles*. The details of this imprisonment can be found beginning in Acts 21:27 through the end of that book. Acts 22:21, 22 especially reveals the anger of Paul's opponents regarding his mission to the Gentiles. Yet Paul calls himself a *prisoner of Jesus Christ*. Does Paul believe that his prison warden is Jesus? In essence, yes! (See also Ephesians 4:1.)

We might be more likely to see Paul's prison warden as the devil, not Jesus. But Paul consistently submitted to the situations in his life as if God had put him there. Paul saw that even the "evil" of imprisonment could be used by God for good.

2. What special stewardship had God entrusted to Paul? (v. 2)

Dispensation is a word we don't use much in everyday speech. We may think of something being dispensed, administered, or managed. Paul is saying, "You know about this particular assignment that God, by His grace, gave me to manage." This thought can cause us to reflect on the things God has entrusted to our own stewardship. The word *things* may bring to mind material objects such as food, clothing, and money. But have you ever thought that you have *information* that God wants you to manage?

Mature Christians understand God's grace, God's truth, and God's promises in ways that others don't understand. God has given you that information not just for your own benefit but for the benefit of others: perhaps your children, your coworker, or your neighbor. We have information that has been revealed to us through God's Word, and God expects us to be good stewards of what we know.

For Paul, the *dispensation of the grace of God* is clear and dramatic. There is no question regarding what he is a steward of: it is that God's salvation is available to Gentile as well as Jew.

3. What mystery was Paul called on to reveal? (v. 3)

The apostle now expanded on the stewardship entrusted to him. It involved God's revelation of a mystery to him. As previously noted, "mystery" refers to some truth that previously had been hidden in God's mind but now had been opened to the understanding of Spirit-taught believers.

Paul had briefly written to these readers before about this mystery. He may have alluded to it in a previous letter, but more probably he was referring to passing statements he had made in this letter. For example, in Ephesians 1:9-10 he spoke of God's plan to draw all things together under the headship of Christ. And in 2:11-22 he revealed more specifically His plan to make Jews and Gentiles one in Christ.

By reading these statements, Paul said, his readers could perceive his understanding in the mystery regarding Christ. Christ is the central feature of all the previously hidden revelation that now is disclosed. Aspects of this revelation may have differing emphases, but the Person and work of Christ unify all of them. Paul's insight, of course, was not his own. It did not come to Paul by research or by rationalization, but by revelation (Gal. 1:11-12).

THE NATURE OF THE REVELATION-Eph. 3:4-6

4. To whom did God make His revelation? (vs. 4-5)

For the Ephesians to understand this "mystery of Christ" is Paul's goal. Part of this understanding includes the realization that the mystery has not been revealed only to Paul, but *it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*. We may review Acts 10:9-20, where God first reveals the secret of the inclusion of the Gentiles to Peter.

Up until that time, God's revelation was frequent and partial, now it is full and final. Then there were faint gleams of light in types and symbols, now there is a clear and complete revelation, "by the Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the agent of inspiration and illumination (John 14:26; 16:12-15).

5. How does Paul describe the Gentiles' status in the church? (v. 6)

The revealed mystery is that through the gospel the *Gentiles* can be equal with Jews. The two can be united together to make up the church. Gentiles are *fellow heirs*, members of *the same body*, and *partakers* of the same *promise*—without having to become Jews first! Everything available to Jews in Christ is available to Gentiles too. The Gentiles are not second-class citizens of the church. Jews and Gentiles should be treating one another as brothers and sisters in Christ (see Galatians 3:26-29).

To recognize that we are all one in Christ is vital. This does not mean that we promote tolerance to the point of accepting sinful behavior. Being one in Christ means, rather, that distinctions with regard to race, culture, and economic status are irrelevant. The church should be leading the charge in genuine racial reconciliation in the way she models the interactions of her members. Christians are all one in Christ.

Are you seeking to love members of the body of Christ no matter what their racial background? Consider the language that you use in describing those of another race: Do you stereotype or demean others by your labels? Look at a list of your friends: Does it include people from other races and socioeconomic backgrounds?

THE PREACHING OF THE REVELATION-Eph. 3:7-9

6. How did Paul compare himself with other saints? Why? (vs. 7-8)

Of this revealed mystery Paul was made a minister, chosen to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 22:21; Gal. 2:7-9).

Paul recognized that he did not deserve this ministry and did not have an innate ability to carry it out. He had received it "according to the gift of the grace of God" (Eph. 3:7).

It took divine grace to transform Paul from a blasphemer into a saint, from a Pharisee into an apostle, and from a persecutor of Christians into a preacher of Christ. Then, it took divine power and authority to enable Paul to function as a minister of God.

Paul's wonder that he should be chosen for this ministry is evident in the words "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints" (v. 8). Paul carried throughout life a profound sense of unworthiness. He saw himself as the "least of the apostles" (1 Cor. 15:9) and the chief of all sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) because he had persecuted the church before his conversion. This is why he had such a deep appreciation for God's grace.

The "unsearchable riches of Christ" conveys the message of wealth beyond description which God provides for all men in the person and work of Christ. It is a vast and measureless resource, this love and grace of God.

7. In what ways do you consider yourself to be an unlikely servant of the gospel? How does this speak of God's grace toward you?

Paul certainly understood the unusual nature of his ministry of the gospel! The irony of a former murderer of Christians being engaged in making more followers of Christ was not lost on him. When we considered our own shortcomings and wrongdoings, we also are unlikely servants, and it is only through the grace of God that we are privileged to share in God's plans.

God has often used unlikely people to bring about His purposes. He used a man with halting speech to lead a nation (Moses; Exodus 4:10). He used the eighth-born son of a shepherd to fell a giant and rule a kingdom (David; 1 Samuel 16:8-12). He used unschooled men to articulate gospel truth (Peter and John; Acts 4:13). And today, He uses each of us!

Paul correctly understood that "it wasn't about him." Rather, it was about God's power to accomplish His will through whomever He chose - then and now.

8. What was the nature of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles? (v. 9)

This is Paul's purpose in preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ. He would cause all men to see by turning the light on. Paul was aiming at spiritual enlightenment and spiritual apprehension. "Fellowship of the mystery" meant the stewardship of worldwide proclamation of Christ and His gospel.

It was fitting that this plan would be unfolded at just the right time, for it came from the One "who created all things." As the material world came from God, so did His redemptive plan.

THE PURPOSE FOR THE REVELATION-Eph. 3:10-13

9. How does God display His wisdom to angelic powers? (vs. 10-11)

The phrase *principalities and powers in heavenly places* refers to the angelic hierarchy. Evidence for the existence of a hierarchy among angels is seen in the term *archangel* in 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9. The fact that angels now have information that they did not have before indicates that angels are not all-knowing (omniscient).

This mystery—that the Gentiles are to have equal access to the eternal God—has been kept hidden even from the angels. When the secret was revealed, the angels learned something about God's *manifold wisdom*. The angels already knew of God's power and beauty: they had seen God create the universe (Job 38:4–7). They knew of God's intelligence and character: they have watched Him create people and deal with humans for thousands of years. But they had not understood this part of the extent of His wisdom until His plan of grace and redemption unfolded (see Romans 11:33).

But how will the angels see this wisdom? It is through the church. Here is a reminder that our lives (and the corporate life of the church) are on display not only to the surrounding world but also to the angels. As they observe, do they always see the multifaceted wisdom of God being worked out?

Our great mission in this life is to know Christ and to make Him known. The church is God's instrument to make known the grace of God "in Christ Jesus our Lord."

10. On what basis do we have boldness and access to God? (v. 12)

"We have boldness" implies freedom of speech. We can approach God in Jesus' righteousness and authority. In Him we also have "access." This word indicates that all barriers to God have been removed and we are introduced into His presence by Christ. Therefore, we approach "with confidence." This word speaks of our frame of mind as we enter God's presence. We come not in fear but in assurance that He will accept us.

All of this is ours through faith in Christ. Although it might seem possible that this verse is referring to Christ's faith, it is actually a reference to the One in whom our faith is placed. Only by trusting Him and the redemption He has purchased for us can we enter the presence of God.

11. How did Paul tell his readers to respond to his imprisonment? (v. 13)

Paul's readers may have been tempted to lose heart because of his imprisonment. If the Ephesians were discouraged about Paul's situation, he told them not to be. His trials and *tribulations* were for their *glory*. What a great perspective on suffering! Paul was not bitter or angry about all the pain he endured. The fact that he was willing to undergo his persecutions showed the Ephesians how much he believed what he preached.

We humans will try to avoid even brief periods of minor irritation. Suffering often surprises us. We take pills to try to wipe out pain as quickly as possible. When we can't see any point to our pain, we get angry.

Yet Paul embraced his suffering as glorious because he trusted God to make good out of it—not necessarily for Paul, but for others (Philippians 1:12). If we adopt the values of a self-absorbed culture, we may ignore the benefits to others or glory to God that our suffering can bring. When you understand what God is calling you to do and are submissive to it, you can withstand great suffering. You can see the glory in it even when it doesn't seem to benefit you personally.

God called Paul to suffer greatly (Acts 9:16). God may not call us to suffer in just the same way Paul did, but we do have our crosses to bear (Mark 8:34). Suffering for Christ will come to each of us in some way. Paul's suffering was for the *glory* of his beloved Ephesians. When that happens, God ultimately is the one glorified. When we understand our calling, we can withstand great suffering and see the glory in it—not for ourselves, but for those we try to reach and ultimately for God Himself.

PRACTICAL POINTS:

1. Biblical truth was revealed by God to His chosen messengers in His own time and on His own terms (Eph. 3:1-2; cf. 2 Pet. 1:20-21).
2. When we are studying Scripture, we need to know that God's truth was revealed over time, not all at once (Eph. 3:3-6).
3. Any true and effective service for God must be empowered by God and must be done with humility (vs. 7-8).
4. God's workings are not always known at the moment (v. 9).
5. God will reveal His eternal plan and purposes in His time and in His way (vs. 10-11).
6. Suffering for Christ is nothing to be ashamed of; rather, it is something to glory in (Eph. 3:12-13; cf. 1 Pet. 3:14).

CONCLUSION:

This week we have seen the wonder of God's plan for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. God has now made plain what was once a mystery when He opened the doors of heaven through the cross for all people and gave to us that task of telling the world.

Paul was willing to go to great lengths—even endure great suffering—so that as many people as possible could be told the secret: God's grace is available to everyone. It doesn't matter what country you were born in, what race you are, how poor you are, whether you are tall or short, fat or skinny, male or female. The God of the universe sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to die for your sins, and He wants to have a relationship with you. Are you willing to do what may be awkward or uncomfortable, to suffer a little or a lot, in order to communicate to those who may be different from you that Jesus loves them?

PRAYER:

Father, we confess that at times we have been proud. Sometimes we have considered our fellow human beings who are created in Your image as less valuable because of various reasons. Please forgive us and remind us to love others as You have loved us. We pray for the opportunity and courage to express Your love to others and to tell them of the free gift of Your grace that is available to all people who will put their faith in Your Son Jesus Christ. In His name (Jesus) we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

Make sure God's revealed secret remains revealed.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "[New Life in the Home.](#)" We will see how the new life in Christ applies to our domestic situations. Study Ephesians 5:21 - 6:4.

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