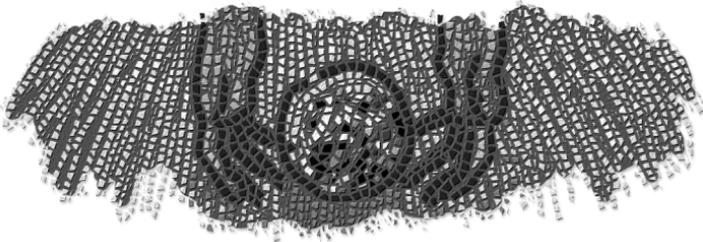


God's Mystery: The Universal Fellowship



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Matt. 10:5, John 4:9, Acts 10:26-28, Ephesians 3.*

Memory Text: “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (*Ephesians 3:20, 21, NKJV*).

Mystery revealed and proclaimed. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul has already written about the unique unity Christ has established in the church. Writers before him have written about unity, but usually it was about unity among a single people, not among various classes, races, and nationalities, an idea that was all but unheard of in the ancient world. But Paul has written about a different kind of unity, one the world up to that point had never seen, the unity that comes through Christ.

Yet, he doesn't end there. He talks also about the church composed of these Jews and Gentiles and about what the Lord will do through this church. Most important, Paul points his readers to the love of God who has accomplished so many things for us through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Week at a Glance: Why did Paul deem it such a “mystery” (*Eph. 3:3*) that Gentiles could also be partakers of God's promises in Christ? Why should this have not been such a mystery to him? What is the church to reveal to heavenly powers? What are the things God has done for us through Christ? What is Paul's prayer for the Ephesians?

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 12.*

The Contents of the Mystery (*Eph. 3:1-6*)

Look up the following texts. How do they help us understand why for Paul this unity was such a mystery? *Deut. 14:2, Matt. 10:5, John 4:9, Acts 10:26-28, Gal. 2:11-14.*

“Mystery” in the New Testament usage is not some hidden secret but a truth, heretofore unknown, that has been revealed by God in His own time through the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of receiving such a revelation (*Eph. 3:3*). As Barclay comments: “Into [Paul’s] life had come the revelation of the great secret of God. That secret was that the love and mercy and grace of God were meant not for the Jews alone but for all mankind. . . . In the ancient world the barriers were complete. No one had ever dreamed that God’s privileges were for all people.” —William Barclay, *The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1976), pp. 122, 123.

Years ago American patriot Thomas Jefferson wrote the famous words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . .” However nice the sentiment, history shows that this view was anything but “self-evident.” On the contrary, all through history various groups believed themselves greater than, and superior to, other nations and people. This idea was so ingrained that even the ancient Israelites—who should have known better because of the revelation given them by God—were contaminated with this sense of self-superiority. Hence, someone as bright, as diligent, and as studious as Paul needed a divine revelation to purge him of his native prejudices. For him, the idea that Jews and Gentiles would be one was so incredible that he deemed it a “mystery,” a concept hard for most of us today to grasp (Why should this be a “mystery?”), because, in our day and age, these kinds of ethnic and national and cultural concepts of superiority, though existing, are looked down upon. Even if someone were to think themselves better than others because of their nationality or race or culture, it’s considered in very bad taste to express such a view. Thus, only as we come to understand a bit of the mind-set of Paul’s time can we grasp just how radical this idea of unity between Jews and Gentiles was to him.

In what ways might you harbor a sense of cultural or ethnic superiority? (Few cultures, if any, are immune to this problem.) Why are such concepts so contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Evidences for the Mystery

Though Paul talks about the gospel going to the Gentiles as a “mystery,” evidences of this promise were scattered in the Old Testament. Look up the following texts. How do they express the idea of the truth about God going to all nations?

Gen. 18:18

Isa. 42:6

Isa. 49:6

Isa. 56:3-8

Isa. 60:3

Jer. 16:19

Zech. 8:23

It’s a sad but powerful testimony to realize the hold that ethnic, cultural, or religious prejudice can have on our minds that even with the above texts, and more, Paul thought it a great “mystery” that the Gentiles should also be brought into the truth about God. Again, it’s a thought that most Christians today, the vast majority being Gentiles, take for granted; it’s hard, from this perspective, to realize how radical an idea this was for someone of the background and education of Paul.

But then, again, we shouldn’t be surprised, should we? The gospel teaches us to love our enemies (*Matt. 5:44*), to bless those who curse us (*vs. 44*), to turn the other cheek (*vs. 39*), to not render evil for evil (*1 Pet. 3:9*), and so forth. In other words, many of the claims of the gospel are radical, going against our basic nature, cutting across some of the most ingrained and accepted cultural, ethnic, and political prejudices we have. If our toes haven’t been stepped on, in one way or another, by Jesus, then we probably haven’t met Him as we should.

When was the last time Jesus stepped on your toes; that is, when was the last time you felt the claims of the gospel cut deep into some of your prejudices or passions? How did you respond?

Through the Church *(Eph. 3:9-13)*

“To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” *(Eph. 3:10)*.

Read the text for today. What incredible message is Paul giving us in this one verse?

Read Ephesians 3:9-13. Notice what theme Paul links in with the plan of salvation in verse 9. Why is this theme so important?

We’re new creations in Christ *(see also 2 Cor. 5:17, Gal. 6:15, Eph. 4:24)*, and we are also part of the church that God Himself has created. He made us, He remakes us, and He made the church of which we, as new creatures, are a part. And it’s through this church, composed of beings remade in His image, that His wisdom is revealed to the universe *(Eph. 3:10)*.

Indeed, this new community, the church God has created, becomes a cosmic exhibit of His power, His grace, and His “wisdom,” which defeated the divisive forces of Satan, “according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus” *(vs. 11, NKJV)*. If it is through creation that God reveals His power to us, it is through new creation that God reveals His wisdom and justice to “principalities and powers” *(vs. 10)*, including fallen and unfallen angels.

“Not to this world only but to the universe are we to make manifest the principles of His kingdom.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 6, p. 13.

In this one text, Ephesians 3:10, we are given another look at the whole issue of the great controversy; we are shown the interest of other cosmic intelligences in the fate of our world here. What’s even more astounding is that according to this text, it’s God’s purpose that through the church His “wisdom” will be made manifest to these other intelligences.

Imagine you were part of these “principalities and powers” from somewhere in the cosmos who were watching the church. Write a diary entry about what you saw there. Compare notes in class this Sabbath.

“Wherefore”

Notice the wonderful promise in Ephesians 3:12; according to Paul, through Jesus we have “access”; that is, access to God Himself. This is what Jesus was talking about in John 10:9 when He said that “I am the door.” Adam had free access to God at first but, having lost it, he hid himself among the trees of the Garden because he could no longer face God with frankness and a clear conscience. The effect of redemption is to restore to humanity a new and bold access to God without fear or restriction and without the need of any intermediaries such as priests or saints or ritual. God is immediately accessible to the trusting soul, through the merits of Christ.

Paul then starts verse 13 with the word *wherefore*, which, in the Greek, also means “on account of.” In other words, he is saying that “on account of” something, he doesn’t want the Ephesians to worry about him. What is that *wherefore* referring to?

Because the Gentiles now belong to the body of Christ, because the eternal purpose is being fulfilled through Jesus, because God’s wisdom is being revealed to the universe, and because we have free access to God, Paul asks his readers not to be too distressed over his sufferings, which have come to him on account of his bringing them the gospel.

In other words, Paul is saying “Don’t focus on me or my trials; focus on the great news of what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ. The good news far overshadows anything I might be going through.”

Struggling? Worried? Fearful about the future? Write out a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the things as revealed to us in this Epistle so far, things Christ has done. Let the reality of the promises we have been reading about overshadow all else in your life. Claim these promises as your own.

The Knowledge of His Love (*Eph. 3:14-21*)

Read Paul's prayer (*Eph. 3:14-21*) over and over. Then paraphrase the essence of His petition. What is he praying for, and why do you think he would offer such a prayer?

Paul prays that Christ would dwell in their hearts. The Greek word used for "dwell" is *katoikem*, which indicates permanent residence. Christ is not a guest but a perpetual part of our lives.

Paul prays for the indwelling Christ so the strengthened inner being "may be able to comprehend" (that is, empowered and enlightened to grasp) the width, length, depth, and height of Christ's love (*vss. 18, 19*). Paul is praying to comprehend the incomprehensible, but he knows that the assurance of the believer rests only in such uninterrupted meditation of God's love. The believers must know with what great love they have been blessed. While Christ's love cannot be fitted into any geometrical measure, it is wide enough to circle the globe and reach every sinner. It is high enough to reach the very throne room of God. It is deep enough to plumb Satan's deepest gutter and pull out from that mess any sinner who calls upon Christ for help and bring him or her to stand under God's sunshine. It is long enough to stretch from "before the foundation of the world" (*Eph. 1:4*) to endless ages of eternity, where that love will be the subject of saints' study. It is a love that "passes all knowledge" and fills all the believers "with all the fullness of God" (*Eph. 3:19, NKJV*).

"Fullness of God" is an expression lavish in assurance and is common to the books of Ephesians and Colossians. It signifies that God is beyond limitation. He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think" (*vs. 20, NKJV*). Rich in mercy, unfathomable in love, limitless in grace, and abundant in power, God has committed the entire resources of heaven to grant "above all that we ask or think" in order that His glory may be manifest "in the church . . . to all generations" (*vss. 20, 21, NKJV*).

How certain are you of the reality of God's love? If someone were to ask "Why do you believe that your God is so loving?" what would you answer? How convincing a case could you make?

Further Study: *Access to God.* “We have access to God through the merits of the name of Christ, and God invites us to bring to Him our trials and temptations; for He understands them all. He would not have us pour out our woes to human ears. Through the blood of Christ we may come to the throne of grace, and find grace to help in time of need. . . . As an earthly parent encourages his child to come to him at all times, so the Lord encourages us to lay before Him our wants and perplexities, our gratitude and love. Every promise is sure. Jesus is our Surety and Mediator, and has placed at our command every resource, that we may have a perfect character. The blood of Christ in ever-abiding efficacy is our only hope; for through His merits alone we have pardon and peace.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1116.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 “We have not merely been saved that we might escape hell; we have been saved in order that God may present a people which will astonish the whole world,” said a great preacher. How well do you think the church has succeeded in doing what this preacher has said?
- 2 Compare your “alien diaries” (see Tuesday’s study).
- 3 Dwell on Ephesians 3:10 as a class. Discuss the implications of that text in light of the great controversy. How do the opening two chapters of Job parallel with what that verse is saying?
- 4 Let individual members of the class give a personal testimony regarding their own experience on knowing God’s love. What can you learn from the different testimonies?
- 5 If someone who had been attending your class is no longer coming to church, what can you do, as a class, to reveal to that person some of the love Paul so eloquently talks about in this chapter?

The Carpenter Who Died for Us

by DOROTHY EATON WATTS

Four carpenters sat on the floor of their small shop in a village in eastern India. As they planed and sanded the wood and fit the pieces together to make beds, tables, and stools, they talked about the man who had come to visit them. He was educated yet he took time to talk with common people and become their friend. The carpenters liked Mathew Reddy, but he was a Christian. They had heard bad things about Christians, but this man seemed so different.

One day when Reddy visited the carpenters' shop, he asked them, "Did you know that the God I worship lived on this earth and worked as a carpenter?"

The men laid down their tools and stared at Reddy. "A God who was a carpenter?" they asked, astonished. "Tell us more about Him."

"Jesus, the Son of God, came to live on this earth to show us what God is like," Reddy said. "He chose to be born as a human, to live in the home of a lowly carpenter, and to work with His hands, just like you do."

"We want to hear more about this carpenter God," the men said. Reddy came often to study the Bible with the carpenters. He explained why Jesus came to earth, how He ministered to others, and how He died to save them from their sins. Eventually the carpenters accepted Jesus as their Lord and invited Reddy to study the Bible with their families. In time 15 members of their families also accepted Jesus as their Lord.

When news of the men's conversions spread through the village, trouble began. People stopped buying furniture from the men; they refused to allow their wives draw water from the village well; shopkeepers refused to sell them rice. Still the carpenters worshiped Jesus. Then some villagers sent their cattle to trample the families' vegetable gardens, destroying their meager crops.

When Adventist leaders learned of the persecution, they provided relief supplies to help keep the families alive and encouraged the men to take their case to the district counselor. The counselor defended the carpenters' right to worship God as they chose and sent police to bring order to the village and assure that the new Christians could worship freely.

Problems still arise from time to time, but the carpenters remain steadfast. "People can do anything they like to us," they insist, "but we will be faithful to the Carpenter who died for us."

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