

THE GREAT MYSTERY

by Ray C. Stedman

The first paragraph in Chapter 3 is, in many ways, the key to this great letter of Paul to the Ephesian Christians. Here he begins to describe in full detail the great mystery which he had devoted his life to propagating around the world. We all love mysteries. There is something about human beings which causes us to be fascinated by something hidden, secret, by cryptic truth which needs to be discovered and revealed. God understands us so thoroughly that he has hidden mystery in everything in life. We do not know anything fully. There is always an element we don't understand. Even terms we commonly use, such as "love" and "joy" and "life" itself, are basically mysterious to us. We know they are absolutely essential to our existence, but we don't know what they are. We struggle constantly trying to understand what are the great realities they represent.

This is true in every area of our lives. Even physicists tell us that, hidden away in every physical manifestation of the world and universe around us, is mystery. The quantum theory, upon which much of modern physics is based, and which has unleashed the whole realm of nuclear fission, has at its heart, say the physicists, a principle of indeterminism, a hidden principle. It states that we never can discover fully the truth about anything; there is an element of hidden information about every subject we go into.

We are ever confronted with mystery. It is mystery which makes life entrancing, fascinating. And God understands this. It is why the Scriptures say, "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing; but the glory of kings is to search it out," {cf, Prov 25:2 RSV}. God knows that we all want to be kings, that we are made to reign. And the glory of kings is to discover that which has been hidden.

The Apostle Paul describes the greatest mystery of life to the Ephesians in these words:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles -- assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. {Eph 3:1-6 RSV}

There, in very brief form, is his statement of the mystery which lies at the heart of all life. As we will see, this is the greatest secret ever presented to the minds of men. It is not new to us -- we have been discussing and discovering aspects of it all along in this letter. But now we come to the full statement of what it is. The paragraph falls very simply into two divisions. Paul is concerned first about his role as a teacher of this mystery, and then about the mystery itself, about what it is he teaches.

Sometimes it is difficult for those who do not read Greek to see how Paul builds his letters. This is particularly true of this passage, because Paul begins "For this reason ..." -- but he doesn't give the reason toward which he is moving until Verse 13! This is the way the apostle's mind worked. He starts out to say one thing but then is captured by the truth of something else he is going to say. So he begins to bring it in ahead of time. Then he is carried along from one truth to another until finally he gets back to what he started to say in the beginning. If you read it this way: "For this reason..." then skip down to Verse 13: "... I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory," you will understand what he is trying to say in the intervening sentences.

The apostle was concerned that the Christians to whom he was writing at this time in his life, the Ephesians, Philippians, and others, would understand why he was going through the struggles he was. If you and I had

been in Rome with Paul as he wrote this letter, and could have stood in the room of the hired house where he was living, chained day and night to a Roman soldier, and watched as he dictated to his *amanuensis*, his secretary, watched him as he paced the floor, perhaps, with the soldier having to walk along with him, stopping now and then to make corrections, we would have understood something of Paul's concern for the recipients of this letter. They could not understand why the mighty apostle had to be a prisoner -- limited, unable to come to them in their need as a growing young church -- and why all communication with him had to be by correspondence. So he was writing to settle their fears and to show them what it was all about.

His first statement is this: "I am a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles -- ." That is the first thing he wants them to know. It is striking that nowhere does Paul ever refer to himself as a prisoner of Caesar. He was Caesar's prisoner. He had been arrested because he was charged by the Jews with sedition, or treason, against the emperor. Therefore, eventually, he was remanded to the care of the palace guard, the personal bodyguard of the emperor. So here he was in Rome, a prisoner of Caesar, awaiting trial before Nero. But never once does he say that he is a prisoner of Caesar; it is always "a prisoner of Christ Jesus." The reason is obvious when you read his letters. He saw that Caesar was not the one who had the final say about him; Jesus did. The duration of his confinement was not determined by Caesar, but by the Lord Jesus. As Paul came to understand the One whom he served, he knew that Jesus is in control of history. He saw him as John did in the book of Revelation -- as sitting on his throne, holding the reins of government in his hands. He is the One who opens, and no man shuts, who shuts, and no man opens, who orders, and his will is carried out. Paul knew, therefore, that anytime the Lord Jesus decided Paul's imprisonment would be of no further value, he would be set free, that when the Lord Jesus spoke, Caesar acted. Therefore, he never saw himself as being the prisoner of Caesar. This is a tremendous lesson to us, who sometimes become worried and anxious about what the political powers-that-be are doing in the world today. Would that we had the faith of this mighty apostle who understood so clearly that Caesar was not in control; Jesus is.

Paul cites some reasons for his imprisonment. The first is that he was a prisoner on behalf of the Gentiles. This refers not only to the fact that his arrest had come about because he was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, but also to the fact that it benefited the Gentiles. Do not forget that the reason Paul was charged by the Jews with sedition against the emperor was because they were so angry that he would carry any message from God to the Gentiles. Jewish scruples and prejudices were terribly offended by the fact that Paul had the nerve, the effrontery, to say to the Jews that the Gentiles were received by God equally as they, that the Gentiles could have equal standing before him. When Paul spoke to the Jewish mob in his own defense, after he was arrested in the temple courts, the thing which triggered their renewed ire was the word "Gentile" in his message. They had been listening carefully to him as he spoke of his conversion, of how he had been called by God, until he stated that he had been sent out unto the Gentiles. Then all hell broke loose again. They mobbed him and would have lynched him on the spot had it not been for the intervention of the Roman guard. So it was because of this great message that he was a prisoner.

Furthermore, he wants these Ephesians to know that they were benefiting by his arrest. I think this is a hint that he recognized that if it were not for the fact he had been made a prisoner, he would never have had time to write these letters which have changed the course of history. His concern for these people was such that he would have gone to them had he been free. He would have preached to them and taught them directly from the Word, but never would have had time to write it down. So perhaps the reason the Lord Jesus kept him a prisoner was that he might have time to write.

He may have to do that with some of us, too. Some of you have learned truth you ought to write down and pass along. And I wonder if sometime the Lord isn't going to lock me up to give me a chance to write some of the things he has laid on my heart. I hope I'll learn from the lesson of Paul in this respect. Writing these letters is the greatest thing the apostle ever did, for it is these which have changed our lives. And he recognizes that they were written on behalf of the Gentiles.

The second thing Paul says about himself, so that they might understand what he was going through, is that he was a steward of God's grace. God had committed a certain responsibility to him. I'm glad the Revised Standard Version translates this word "stewardship" instead of "dispensation," for "dispensation" is often misunderstood in our day. But if we see it as a stewardship we will understand it. A steward was a servant to whom a certain responsibility was committed, certain goods were given, that he might "dispense" them, might

give them out to other people. This is the biblical idea behind the word *dispensation*. It is not a period of time at all; it is a responsibility to dispense something, a stewardship. This is what Paul said was given to him. He was a responsible steward. This is exactly in line with what he had written to the Corinthians much earlier. In First Corinthians 4 he says,

This is how one should regard us [apostles], as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. {1 Cor 4:1 RSV}

The "mysteries" are the sacred secrets that God knows about life, which men desperately need to know. Think of this! This is what Paul says we Christians are -- beginning with apostles, and including everyone who names the name of Christ -- we are servants of Christ, and stewards, responsible servants, given the responsibility of dispensing the mysteries of God, of helping people understand these great secrets which explain life and make it possible to solve the difficulties and problems of our human affairs. To us is committed this responsibility. This is how Paul sees himself -- as a steward of the mysteries of God.

And, more than this, he was taught this personally by none other than the Lord Jesus himself. "It was made known to me by revelation." This is where we get our understanding of the authority of this great apostle.

There are those who tell us that the Apostle Paul learned his gospel from the other apostles, who in turn had heard it from Jesus, and that, therefore, Paul's apostleship is somewhat less than theirs. But Paul says this is not true. He tells us very plainly in his letter to the Galatians that when he was converted on that Damascus road, "I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ," {Gal 1:12 RSV}. He didn't talk with the apostles; in fact, it was three years before he ever went back to Jerusalem after his conversion. And then he saw only James, the Lord's brother, and they didn't talk about doctrine. It wasn't until fourteen years later that he ever had an opportunity to sit down and compare notes with all the other apostles. And, he says, they added nothing to him. He understood everything they did, knew everything Jesus had taught them in the days of his flesh.

A striking example of this is found in First Corinthians 11, where he writes about the Lord's supper. He says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me,'" {1 Cor 11:23-24 RSV}. In other words, Jesus himself had appeared to Paul and had told him all that went on in the Upper Room. So when Peter and James and John and the other apostles began to compare notes with Paul, they were astonished that this apostle, this man who had been the persecutor of the church and the chief murderer of the saints in Jerusalem, understood not only the doctrine they had been taught, but also the very events they had gone through. Thus they had to acknowledge that he was an apostle on equal terms with them. This is what gives Paul his authority.

Every now and then we run across someone who says, usually in defense of Women's Liberation, that Paul was a crusty old bachelor whom no one can really trust, and that we must understand that he was conditioned by the culture of his time, and that therefore one must pick and choose among his writings. Paul himself, and all the other apostles, would deny this. Here was a man who spoke with direct authority, commissioned by the Lord Jesus himself.

The third element of his stewardship, Paul says, is that it has given him great insight: "... the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly." Scholars are not exactly sure what he meant by that.

Some feel that he had written another letter before this, which had explained much of this mystery. But personally I think it is a reference to what he has written previously in this letter. In Chapter 1, Verses 9-10, he says,

For he [God the Father] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. {Eph 1:9-10 RSV}

That is the brief statement he had written to these Ephesian Christians, and to which he refers. He says, "When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ." That is, "You can understand that I have great grasp and understanding of what this mystery is, that it is really the secret of all things, touching everything in life. It is at the heart of all human existence. It is the mystery of the goal toward which God is moving in human affairs; therefore, it encompasses space, time, matter -- all of life." And he sums it up in these words: "the mystery of Christ" -- Jesus Christ, at the heart of all things.

None of us can help but be aware that this is an extremely troubled time in which we are living:

- We do not know how to solve the problems which are overwhelming us.
- We are being swamped by our own inventions. We continue to make automobiles even after they have filled the highways and poisoned the air. We don't know how to break loose from this syndrome.
- We don't know what to do with the millions of people who have been shoved off into ghettos, areas of our cities where economic pressures force them to live, and prevent them from having available to them the resources of life that many of us enjoy. We don't know how to balance this.
- We don't know how to feed the world.
- We are unable to stem the tide of broken marriages, and so our divorce rate is higher than that of any other nation in the world.

We don't know what to do about these things. Why? Many writers -- thoughtful, perceptive men -- are sitting down and trying to analyze where we have gone wrong, and why cannot we understand what to do. Some propose one solution and some another; some are partially right, and some are almost totally wrong. But the reason they cannot grasp the answer is that they have never dealt with the heart of the problem, the great secret to all things. The key mystery is Christ, says the apostle.

If you read that as merely theological language, you have missed the import of what he is saying -- that every bit of life finds its final solution in the person and being of the Lord Jesus himself. God has set his Son at the heart of all things. Therefore the understanding of this great mystery is the key to the ultimate solutions for which men are seeking today. If we begin to understand what Christ is, who he is, what he does, how we can lay hold of him -- we will begin to see the solutions of these problems unfold, as they are indeed unfolding in many of our lives. Solutions are coming into being as we grasp what Christ has made available to us. I know that sometimes we are so blinded by familiarity with these terms that we miss the impact of this. But I pray that God will open the eyes of your understanding, that you will see how fantastic is this great mystery, and how important it is to understand it thoroughly, and to enter into it.

When Einstein discovered his theory of relativity, very few people grasped it or understood it. But when people began to operate on its basis, even though they didn't fully understand it, they began to change the world. Our whole modern era was brought about by the discovery of a secret which was hidden in nature until the time when Einstein stumbled upon a few hints of it. And there is much yet to be learned, even in this realm. But how much more are there great riches in store for us who will give some time and thought and effort to grasping this great secret which Paul sets forth before us here -- the ultimate secret behind all things: the mystery of Christ!

In this next sentence he gives us a brief summary of this great mystery:

When you read this you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that is, how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. {Eph 3:4-6 RSV}

There is the mystery:

The first thing he says about it is that it has been hidden in the past. That is, great men of God in the Old Testament did not understand this mystery. As Paul looks back upon these great men of the past -- Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others -- he says that though they understood much, though they looked into the future far beyond our own day and God showed them what the end of all things would be, nevertheless they did not understand this mystery. The secret was hidden to men of past ages. When did it begin to open up? The answer is, in Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus himself began to unfold the mystery. I refer you to Matthew 13, where you have it recorded that our Lord spoke these amazing words. In Verse 34, Matthew tells us this:

All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables,

I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world." {Matt 13:34 RSV}

Our Lord, then, began to unfold this mystery, to tell us things that were hidden from the very foundation of the world. So it is obvious, from what the apostle says here in Ephesians, that God needed to prepare human beings for the unfolding of this secret. He had to get them ready for it. This he did with the rituals and symbols in the Old Testament -- the giving of the Law and the sacrifices, which helped us to understand that we human beings have something inherently wrong with us, which cannot be cured by our making a few good resolutions. Rather, it is something that is drastically and terribly and deeply wrong. The only thing that can cure it is death itself. God had to prepare this race to be able to grasp that fact and to be ready to believe it. And even then he had not fully revealed this mystery. A little was revealed in the past, but the great secret was kept hidden.

But it has now been revealed, Paul says, "to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." There is a line of teaching called 'ultradispensationalism,' in which certain teachers (who are genuine believers in Christ) teach that only the Apostle Paul knew this secret, that to him was given the privilege of unveiling it for the first time to human minds and hearts. But, as we have already seen, it was the Lord Jesus who began to unveil it. And, as Paul himself says here, it was made known to all the apostles and prophets, i.e., the writers of the Scriptures, such as Luke and James and others who were not apostles, but who were prophets. In the closing verses of Romans 16 there is a very clear statement on the unveiling of this mystery:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you, according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings [i.e., the Scriptures] is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith -- to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen. {Rom 16:25-27 RSV}

Now we come to the actual mystery itself. It consists of this great truth: That the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and joint partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Here Paul does something that he does frequently (and only the Apostle Paul does this) -- he coins words. He runs out of language, is unable to put what he wants to say into the words at his disposal. So he invents new ones. He puts words together. And here he makes up three words which you find nowhere else in the Greek New Testament. They are, literally:

1. Joint-heirs,
2. Joint-bodies, and
3. Joint-partakers.

When they come to Christ, Jews and Gentiles together are joint heirs, joint members of one body, and joint partakers of the promise. What is he talking about?

Well, in those three terms you have the answers to the greatest struggles with which we humans are engaged today:

"Joint-heirs" has to do with possessions. Here he is touching the whole problem of man and his universe, man living in a natural world, the dominion (or lack of it) of man over that world, and the reason why we cannot solve our ecological riddles. The answer, as is detailed in other places in Scripture, is that the old creation which has existed since the beginning of time is gripped by an unbreakable law, which Paul calls "the law of decay" in Romans 8. It is The Second Law of Thermodynamics, if you want the scientific term for it, the law of entropy. This law states that energy is becoming less available, everything is running down, deteriorating. And we cannot break this law. This is why the ecological problems of today are unsolvable. There is no way we can break through this law.

But Paul says that in Christ the breakthrough has occurred. In Christ, God is beginning a new creation, one that lives by a wholly different principle and is not subject to this law. And this creation has already begun!

You see, the thing which was not taught in the Old Testament was the resurrection of Jesus, and the effects of it in our lives right now. In the Old Testament there is very little reference to the resurrection of the body. There are a few references -- just enough to teach the truth, so that the Old Testament believers knew there was life beyond death. But they didn't know what kind of life, what it would be like. This was hidden from them. They died in hope, but that hope was not very well defined. And the one thing they did not know at all was that the life beyond death, resurrection life, could be made available to us while we are still living. This is what they never understood. You will never find that taught in the Old Testament in those terms. But this is what the apostles were teaching -- that God has already broken through the old creation, and, right in the midst of the old, he is creating a new. Men and women today can live on the basis of this new creation.

We can learn how to handle our environment, even, on the basis of this new creation yet today. Christians have the answer to the ecological crisis. This is why Dr. Francis Schaeffer has written a book called *Pollution and the Death of Man*, and related this subject to the Christian answer. This is the only way these problems can be worked out. What we are to inherit from God, ultimately, is the world. Paul tells us, "All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours;" {1 Cor 3:21b-22 RSV}. And the book of Hebrews tells us that we do not yet see all things subject to Christ, but we do see Jesus, the One who has been made heir of all things, and in him we share that heirship, so that one day all things subject to this new law will be ours. One day there will be a reversal of the law of decay, and all things will begin to pick up energy again and be renewed, revitalized, in tremendously increasing degree.

In the realm of performance this is already true. This is the struggle of humanity which is answered by our becoming "joint-members of one body." Why can't we get along with one another? Why do we fight each other? Why are there so many family breakups? Why is there so much hatred and resentment and bitterness and malice? Because when we are still living in the old creation those things are inevitable. If you fulfill the flesh, there is no way by which you can keep from living in disharmony with people around you. Ah, but in the realm of the Spirit the breakthrough has already occurred. When we begin to "walk in the Spirit," as we understand what that phrase really means, then we can love, forgive, begin to reach out to others. The whole experience of life is transformed, right now.

Finally, the apostle touches the matter of power: "partakers of the promise." The promise was of the giving of the Holy Spirit -- that God's Spirit himself would live in us, and empower us to do everything God wants us to do. Any time we know there is something we ought to do, something we should do, something it would be right for us to do, but which we don't want to do -- if we then cast ourselves in helplessness upon the Lord Jesus and trust his word, we can assume the power of the Spirit to do that thing. And the power of the Spirit will always come flowing through right at that point, to enable us to do what otherwise we could never do.

This is Paul's explanation of the great mystery. It is a breakthrough, a new and marvelous way of life which has already begun in our experience, and which, ultimately, will solve all the problems facing humanity. The remarkable thing about it is that you can experience it right now. In Colossians Paul puts it this way: "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b}. It is the only hope you will ever have of living according to the glory God designed for man when he created him in the beginning.

Put in these terms, this means that the present "civilization" we are living in secular life, with its politics, its education, its legislative system, its reportage of news events can be likened to a cocoon, clinging lifelessly to the branch of history. But inside that cocoon, God is working a metamorphosis; a transformation is taking place. And one of these days that cocoon will open, in the Springtime of the world, and a new being will step out -- a being which is being created at this time right within the cocoon.

This is a great parable that God teaches us in nature. Did you ever wonder why caterpillars crawl on the ground? Why don't they run around on four legs? Because God is teaching us things in nature, if we could only see. This is a picture of life in the flesh, the natural human life. Everything that lies in a caterpillar's path is a horrible obstacle over which it must painfully crawl. It cannot see very far, and doesn't know which turn to take. This is an apt description of the way we live our lives as natural human beings.

But God has a program for a caterpillar. He has a wonderful plan for its life. I don't know if anyone has told the Four Spiritual Laws to a caterpillar, but it would be interesting to do so, because the first point would be, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." What is it? "That you'll die, that you'll come to the end, that somehow all your old life as a caterpillar will decay and you will be left lifeless and dead, in a cocoon of your own spinning, hanging on a limb, and apparently it will all be over." But it isn't over. Right in the midst of that cocoon something happens. We don't really know what it is. Nobody has yet ever found out what goes on inside a cocoon that transforms a caterpillar into a butterfly. But we know that one of these days, when the sun begins to shine, all these dead-looking cocoons will begin to break open, and there will emerge a beautiful creature, designed no longer for life on the lower level, crawling along over every obstacle, but able to rise above them, able to spread its wings and fly as an expression of beauty and joy throughout the world and nature.

This is God's lesson regarding what he is doing now. The cocoon is the old creation, and in the midst of it the new is taking shape. And we can live in that new creation right now. This is the great mystery.

This may seem like old stuff to you, for unfortunately these words have come so frequently to our ears that we've lost the impact of them. But I hope you can go back, perhaps during this Christmas season, and think again of the breathless wonder of this great mystery which Paul declares to us -- how in Jesus Christ we can step out of the old, already, into the new creation. And the effects of it can be felt in our relationships with others, in our attitudes within, in our treatment of the environment around, in our enjoyment of the world of nature which is already present around us, and ultimately, in the power of the Holy Spirit imparted to us to make us live as we ought to live, in the fullness of joy and peace and life and glory and rejoicing before God. One of these days, Springtime is going to come to the world, and when it comes, what God as already been preparing will then become manifest.

Now, you can't wait till that time to get on the bandwagon; it has already started.

This is the great mystery. It has already begun. And you are either a part of the new creation, or you are a part of the old; one or the other, but never both.

You may live your life as a member of the new creation -- in the midst of the old, but not part of it any more -- "no longer strangers, no longer foreigners," says the apostle. "You have broken with all that. Therefore, live life as members of a new race," is his exhortation. "Stop going on in the old way. Don't go on any longer subject to all the heartache and misery and malice and hatred and resentment and oppression which comes from the old creation. Rather, break loose and be free in Jesus Christ."

When you do, you will understand the practical import of this fantastic mystery which is at the heart of all life, and which God will begin to unfold to us more and more as we go on, until it simply "blows our minds" with the wonder of what is waiting for us.

This is what Christmas is all about. This is what began at Bethlehem. The first breakthrough was on Christmas Day, when in the darkness of the world -- sunk in apathy and misery, in superstition and blindness, and in death -- a light broke through. "A people who sat in darkness saw a great light," {cf, Isa 9:2 RSV}. And that light has been reaching out to the world ever since, bringing men out of the old into the new.

I don't know how you think of yourself, but I know that it helps greatly to personalize these great truths, to remember that this is where God wants the application finally to be made -- right home into your hearts, into your lives, into your families.

You are a new creation in Jesus Christ.

You are no longer part of the old but part of that new program which, looking into the future, is waiting for the dawn of a new world, a new life, and a new day, when all God's people shall be one over all the earth, and no harm or heartache will occur in all the world.

This is the mystery, as Paul describes it to us, and as God wants us to understand it.

May God help us to make it personal in our own lives.

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