

# SECRET RICHES

by Ray C. Stedman

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We are dealing again with the great mystery which the Apostle Paul glories in, a mystery which began at Bethlehem with the song of the angels to the shepherds, and the beauty of a huge star shedding its silver glory upon the waiting earth below, and all the marvel of that first Christmas Day when the wonder which had been secret for ages began to be unfolded -- the glory of what God had in mind for man.

In the third chapter of Ephesians, beginning with Verse 7, we come to the apostle's further explanation of what he calls in Chapter 6, "the mystery of the gospel" -- this great good news which has done so much to change human lives.

As we saw in our last study, in the opening words of this third chapter, this great mystery is the answer to the struggles that men have with their environment. Paul showed us how Jews and Gentiles together are made to be joint heirs of God, able to enter into all the physical possessions that God had in mind when he put man on this earth in the beginning.

It is also the answer to the problems of our humanity, of our fallen character -- war and enmity and hatred and cruelty. Paul showed us how in Jesus Christ men are made joint members of one body, and all the middle walls that separate them are removed. This has been demonstrated clearly again and again when people of different backgrounds and cultures and classes, different outlooks, different races, have come together in Christ and found that all the differences which once seemed to be so tremendous are reduced to nothing, and they are able to overlap them and be healed in their fellowship together.

And then we saw that the mystery of the gospel is the answer to the impotence of man -- the fact that we are unable, oftentimes, to fulfill our ideals and to realize our dreams. We are failures in doing what we know we ought to do -- to love, to forgive, to restore. But in the mystery of the gospel, Jews and Gentiles alike are made joint partakers of the promise of the Spirit of God. The power of God is given to us to do what we otherwise could never do. Those who have learned to reckon upon this power find they are able to love and forgive when they never could have otherwise. So this gospel touches the heart of humanity's problems.

As we come into the section beginning with Verse 7, we learn much more about this great mystery:

**Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given ... {Eph 3:7a RSV}**

The personal note with which he begins this section is explained in Verse 13, where he says,

**So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory. {Eph 3:13 RSV}**

The reason he wrote this section of the letter is that these Ephesian Christians were troubled by his suffering -- not so much because they felt sorry for him, for of course they did, but because their faith was being threatened by it. They were really troubled that a great apostle -- the very fountainhead of truth, as far as they were concerned -- should appear to be a helpless victim of Caesar's cruelty, chained to a Roman soldier day and night. Their faith was very seriously threatened by this. Paul writes back, and says, "You've got it all wrong. You see, you don't understand what suffering is. Suffering for the cause of Christ is the sure way to victory." This mighty apostle had learned that the cross is always the way to a crown, and that there is no way to guarantee that the victory is certain unless there is an element of the sufferings of Christ being filled up within the physical body of a Christian, of a believer in Jesus Christ. So Paul is writing to assure them that everything is right. There is nothing at all wrong about his position. It is exactly right and he glories in this

fact.

You will notice that there is a sense of amazement and wonder as he writes these words: "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power." Two things are cited here which the apostle never got over being amazed at:

One was the value of the gift God had given him. This gift, which opened to him his tremendous ministry, came to him, he says, by the grace and power of God. God himself gave this gift.

You remember that, in First Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Paul describes the gifts of the Spirit, and he says that these are given to every believer, to everyone who is a member of the new creation in Jesus Christ. This is quite in harmony with what God has done in the old creation. When we were born into this human life, this natural life, we received certain gifts. We call them talents. Some of you are musically inclined. Some of you are artistic. Some of you have leadership abilities. Some can speak. Some can write. You have various talents. They are part of God's gifts to Adam, and, in his fallen nature, they have been passed on to us. Therefore it is only right that when there is a new creation, a new man, he too should be given talents. Just as you discover and fulfill your natural life by discovering your natural talents, so you fulfill your new life by discovering the gifts of the Spirit which God has given to you.

Here is one of the gifts that Paul revealed in. As I read this list of the gifts of the Spirit, I think it is very likely that this great apostle had every one of the gifts of the Spirit. I find several he unquestionably possessed. The gift he is talking about here is the gift of evangelism. When he says in Verse 8,

**To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles ... {Eph 3:8 RSV}**

The word translated "to preach" really means "to evangelize" the Gentiles. So Paul had the gift of evangelism among his many gifts, and this is what drove him out and made him long to reach to the far corners of the earth to preach Christ to people who had never heard of him before. He had this hunger within, which is characteristic of the gift of evangelism.

And this gift led to his particular ministry, which was to the Gentiles. A gift is the ability to do something. The ministry is the area in which it is done. It is the Lord Jesus' prerogative to assign that ministry to every one of us. You all have gifts, if you know Jesus Christ. Your gift is to be discovered. Then the Lord Jesus will lead you into the place to operate that gift. And that is your ministry. Every believer ought to have a ministry. This is what makes the church function as God intended it to do -- as each one of us has discovered our gifts and the ministry the Lord Jesus has given us. Both Peter and Paul had gifts of evangelism. But Peter's ministry was to the Jews and Paul's was to the Gentiles. Some of you may have a ministry to children. Some may have a ministry to older people. Some to blacks. Some to Chicanos, perhaps. But a particular gift can be exercised in all of these ministries, you see. So the gift opens the door to the ministry. Paul never got over the wonder of that gift. What a glorious thing it was, he said, that God had given him the great gift to preach this tremendous message to men who had never heard the good news before.

The second thing he never got over was his amazement at the weakness of his own person. Notice his language here: "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given..." I know some people think Paul is merely being polite here, depreciating himself as we might. But I am sure that the apostle felt deeply in his heart what he put into words. This is not looking back to when he was a Pharisee. This is a present assessment of his worth: "the very least of all the saints." This is what Paul thought of himself.

I have heard people say, as they have read some of Paul's writings, "This man is an egoist. He talks about his holiness and his faithfulness and his tenderness and compassion. He says, 'Be imitators of me, even as I am of Christ.'" They are amazed at what they think to be the conceit of the Apostle Paul. But if you really want to know what he thought of himself, here it is. In fact you can detect a gradual change of this apostle's idea of himself. In the first Corinthian letter, which was written earlier than this, he says, "I am the least of all the apostles." That is only last in a list of thirteen. Here he says, "I am the least of all the saints." In fact, he invents a word here, puts the comparative and the superlative together: "I am less than the least of all the

saints." That estimation is quite a bit lower. But when he wrote Second Timothy, his last letter, he said, "I am the chief of sinners."

Now that is progress! It is right in line with what our Lord said would happen: You remember that he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me," {Matt 11:29a KJV}. What are you to learn about him? Well, "I am meek and lowly of heart," {Matt 11:29b KJV}. Here we are face to face with the phenomenon which is frequently seen in the great leaders and saints of the past. It is that the older they grow, the more acute is their own sense of sin and of weakness in themselves. They see that what they once thought to be natural strengths are really weaknesses. So if this is beginning to happen to you, you are growing as a Christian.

I remember that, when I began my Christian life, as a young man, I thought I was very close to being acceptable. For the most part I had a pretty good record. There were a few areas I well knew were not right, but I thought that if God straightened those out, everything would be fine. But gradually God has opened my eyes to see that, in those areas where I thought I was doing well, I was utterly repugnant, in God's presence, utterly rejected by him. My strengths were really my weaknesses, I have had to learn through the years. I ran across a quotation from the great psychologist, Carl Jung, which says this very well:

In the second half of life [Some of you haven't arrived there yet. But you will, if you hang on. So this lies ahead] the necessity is imposed of recognizing no longer the validity of our former ideals, but of their contrary, of perceiving the error in what were previously our convictions, of sensing the untruth in what was our truth, and of weighing the degree of opposition and even of hostility in what we once took to be love.

That is an accurate statement of the experience of those who begin to see themselves. And as Paul began to understand the full revelation of the mystery which is in Jesus Christ, the clarity of his knowledge made him able to see himself as he was. And the more he saw himself the more he said, "I am utterly dependent upon the grace of God. There is no strength in me." Some of us are beginning to say with Paul, "In me, that is, in my flesh, there dwells no good thing. Only that in me which is of God is worthwhile," {cf, Rom 7:17 KJV}.

The glory of the mystery is right there -- out of weakness comes strength. And when this mighty apostle could say of himself, "I am less than the least of all the saints," this was when he was able to go on and describe a fantastically effective ministry. In these next verses you have it set forth in beautiful terms:

**To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. {Eph 3:8-10 RSV}**

What he is saying is that his ministry had a fantastic effect, and it was threefold in its dimensions:

First, there was the discovery by those to whom he preached of unsearchable riches in Christ. What is he talking about? Well, he is saying that the first effect of the ministry of the gospel is the enrichment of life right now. Wherever Paul preached, hearts were changed, hurts were healed, families restored, the bad habits of a lifetime were broken, and joy and hope and love and peace began to come into people's lives. Every place he went, Paul formed colonies of whole persons, of healed people who were rejoicing in a wonderful sense of liberty and freedom in Christ. Those are the unsearchable riches of Christ, right now -- not in heaven someday but right now!

The same thing is happening today. This past week, Bob Smith, one of our pastors who is at home recovering from a severe heart attack, picked out a handful of letters from the thousands he has received, and sent them to the rest of our staff for us to share in his joy. They reflected the blessings people have experienced as they have been helped by Bob's ministry through the years:

- There was a letter from a husband who had been set free from heroin addiction and had enjoyed a tremendous change in his home because of that.

- There was a letter from a young man in the service who wrote to give thanks for all he had been taught through the years. He had never realized it was so important until he was out facing life in a cold, cruel, and miserable world.
- There was a letter from a former leader of Women's Lib, who had found the secret of womanhood in Jesus Christ and gloried as she never had in what she had known before.
- There were letters from long-time Christians who were overflowing with the glory of thirty years of living with Jesus Christ.

My mail has been very similar. I want to share with you the opening paragraphs of a letter from a former member of the church here who has moved away to another area. This is what he wrote:

This Christmas is very special to me. I will never forget this year. This was the year that the Lord revealed himself to me in a most remarkable way. Last year saw me lose a substantial part of my life's savings in a fraudulent business venture. This year the deteriorating trend continued with problems in my health, my job, and within the church I attend. Then came word that my daughter's marriage was breaking up. All coincided to bring me to a new low. I was really hurting. Everything seemed to be going wrong. And I was in a state of total despair.

At this point I cried out, "Where are you God? Help me!" He answered by prayer gloriously, and I was filled with assurance. My troubles have not disappeared, but I am able to cope with them, and my understanding of God has expanded. I am joyous. [What brought about the change? He says,] It was totally the gift of God. I do give thanks also to friends who knew my plight -- although they didn't know how bad it was -- and were praying for me, and to the new pastor of our church, who is very effective. There was also the radio ministry of Christian broadcasts which I listen to as I am on the road 95 miles each day traveling to and from work. I thank God that he is showing me how life is meant to be lived. And my desire now is to live it his way, regardless of outward circumstances. [Then he underlines:] I know that my Redeemer lives.

There are the unsearchable riches of Christ. How many thousands, even millions, living today could add to this story! How many right in our own congregation could stand and tell of enormous enrichment of life! That is a part of the unsearchable riches in Jesus Christ, as the glory of this tremendous mystery breaks upon human hearts and people begin to discover how life was meant to be lived in the first place. The story can never be fully told until we get to glory. Only then will we ever know anything of the incredible depths of the riches of Jesus Christ.

Then Paul speaks of the second dimension of the effect of his ministry -- the distribution of a universal knowledge. He says it was given to him "... to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things..." Isaiah, in that great ninth chapter of his prophecy, predicted that the people who walked in darkness would see a great light, that those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness, upon them would the light shine. And then he goes on in that chapter to write that well-known verse:

**For unto us a child is born,  
unto us a son is given,  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,  
and his name shall be called,  
"Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God,  
The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." {cf, Isa 9:6 KJV}**

He is the light which illuminates the darkness, and this is exactly what Paul says. The word translated "to make (all men) see" really means "to enlighten" all men -- to bring light to all men about the knowledge of this mystery. And it should be the "stewardship" of the mystery, literally, rather than the "plan" of the mystery. Paul gloried in enlightening men with this tremendous secret because he knew that the extent of good government, of international peace, of law and order, of enlightened education, of control of demonic forces, of true progress in the realm of technology and science, is proportionate to the degree to which this mystery is known and understood, and believed, by men. This is what changes life.

And this is why he ties with this the phrase "God who created all things." God has ordained life to this end, and it is he who enables men to reach out, to learn, to grasp, to understand -- according to the degree to which the secret of life is spread in a society.

You have only to look at the history of our nation in the last ten years to see how true this is. When the light of the gospel begins to grow dim, then immediately anarchy, lawlessness, violence, rebellion, and revolution begin to increase immediately. Superstition, occultism, and darkness come flooding back in as soon as the light begins to dim. God teaches us this on the physical level. Light a candle in a dark room and it is mostly darkness with a little light. Come into a room where there is ample illumination and the darkness is completely gone. But let that illumination dim, and the darkness increases on every hand.

Paul knew this great secret. He knew that the enjoyment of human life, of pleasures and recreation, is entirely dependent upon the degree to which the gospel penetrates a people. Therefore he gloried in spreading this word in the dark and weary pagan community into which he came in that 1st Century.

We need to understand, as this verse tells us, that this mystery was hidden by God until the world was ready for it. The world needed to be prepared for this great secret. And all the ages of history before the coming of the Lord Jesus were simply God's way of getting the world ready for the unfolding of this tremendous mystery -- the glory of a man, Jesus, who fulfills the wonder of uniting God and man, and makes the rest of man partakers of the divine nature. There is nothing in all the world like this great secret. And God had to get us ready for it.

I ran across a very helpful quotation from Dr. Arthur Custance, a very godly Canadian scientist. He says,

The processes of history have special significance because the crucifixion could not be merely an isolated event occurring in some dark age of lawlessness and barbarism, or in some corner of the earth where knowledge of it might filter back into the world only by accident. It was an event which had to be appropriated, witnessed, and recorded, which had to be performed in an orderly, legal way, according to an accepted standard of behavior and judgment to which mankind as a whole would give rational consent. It had to occur at a time when the event itself would be sufficiently public, one might say publicized, that there could never be doubt about its having happened. It had to come to pass when there was a sufficiently sophisticated and dependable means of communicating the news to a large population that was not merely numerous but fluid, so that word of it could be carried far and wide.

He goes on to speak of the need for a legal code, and for a police force with sufficient strength to prevent a lynching, and a universal language, so the message would be culturally universal. And then he says,

These circumstances may have occurred repeatedly since that time, and perhaps upon occasion in an even more effective way. But it is almost certain that this was the first time that the circumstances had all occurred together. The Roman Empire guaranteed, at least for a short while, a world ideally ordered as a proper setting, both cultural and legal.

This is what Paul meant when, in Galatians, he said, "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law ... in order that we might receive the adoption as sons," {cf, Gal 4:4-5}. This was the beginning of the unfolding of this fantastic mystery which is the secret of the governing of human lives.

The last thing the apostle says is that his ministry had the effect of demonstrating of a unique wisdom: "... that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." This is to go on now, while the church is being formed. It is a revelation in which these "principalities and powers" are learning something by observing the church. What does he mean? Well, this is one of the instances in which Scripture clearly states that we are surrounded by an invisible spiritual kingdom made up both of demons and angels. In Ephesians 6 Paul says, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers in the heavenly places -- wicked spirits from the very headquarters of evil itself," {cf, Eph 6:12}. But we also learn from other passages that angels are watching us. It is as if we are on stage in a great theater, with the angels gathered around in rows and rows, watching us, learning from what is happening here in the lives of believers. This is why, in First Corinthians 11, Paul says to women that their

dress and their demeanor toward their husbands teaches the angels something. He says it ought to be correct "because of the angels," {1 Cor 11:10}. Angels are watching and learning. What are they learning? Let me share with you another quotation from Dr. Custance:

The key to the existence of such a universe as this lies, I believe, in the fact that God wished to show forth that aspect of his being which the angels have never comprehended, namely his love, without at the same time surrendering that part of his being which they do comprehend, namely his holiness.

So the revelation of the mystery is essentially the revelation of the love of God -- in ways that make the angels amazed and startled as they learn the tremendous secrets of God's love. This is why the Apostle Peter says in his first letter that our salvation is so tremendous that the angels longed to look into these things. What does he mean? Well, that God's incredible love is being demonstrated by the church in such a way as to startle and amaze the angels, as they see the "many-colored" wisdom of God. The word translated "manifold" here is literally the "many-colored" wisdom of God.

Why did the apostle choose this poetic adjective, which is very rare in the New Testament? It is because, as we know, life consists of many colors. Have you ever had a blue Monday? Yes, we all have blue days. And red hours of anger and passion. And golden moments of glory. And dark, somber valleys through which we must pass. And lush, green pastures into which we are sometimes led. All of these, the apostle suggests, are chosen by the love of the Father. That is what he means. God's love is manifest in all of these hues of life. His many-colors of wisdom are aspects of his love. So, when you go through a blue time, it is God's love that you are learning. God's love chose it for you. When you go through a dark and pressured time, somber and discouraging, the love of God is being manifested there. You may not see it, but God knows how to make it clear. And even the joyful times are manifestations of the many-colored wisdom of God.

And, as the angels watch us, they see us losing our anxiety gradually. We learn to trust God, to turn from our fears, and to renew ourselves with divine strength, to draw upon God's great and mighty promises in the hour of pressure and danger. As they see this, their praise begins to ring out in amazement and wonder at a God -- the God of justice, the God of infinite holiness whom they know -- who is also able to find a way by which he can lavish his love upon the very ones who deserve his wrath. This makes the angels praise God. They glory as Charles Wesley captured it in that great hymn that I love to sing: "'Tis mystery all, the Immortal died." Imagine that -- the Immortal died! "Who can explore this strange design? In vain the first-born serf tries to solve the depths of love divine. 'Tis mercy all, let earth adore, and angel minds inquire no more." You never can completely solve the mystery of God's amazing love, manifested in the many-colored wisdom which leads us into the circumstances of our life. But it is this that edifies the angels, and teaches the demons, of the nature of the greatness of the God we serve.

Paul never lets us forget where it all comes from. Verse 11:

**This was according to the eternal purpose [literally, "the ordering of the ages"] which he has realized [accomplished] in Christ Jesus our Lord, {Eph 3:11 RSV}**

It all comes through him. In Christ, God has ordered the ages so as to produce the unveiling of this great mystery. This means that all of time and all of history is woven together by the hand of God to bring to pass these great events. Paul and the other apostles proclaimed it. And it is now our fantastic privilege to declare it among men. And Paul goes on to link with it these words:

**... in whom [in Jesus Christ our Lord] we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him. {Eph 3:12 RSV}**

We weak, frail, fumbling, human creatures have access boldly to come in confidence before such a God and to pour out our needs before him, and to find him to be a compassionate, tender, loving father who is concerned to bring to bear all the power of his omnipotence to work out the problems of our lives. Is there any message greater than this that man could ever hear? What a glorious message! No wonder this apostle got tremendously excited and amazed at the wonder that this message should be committed to him, that he should declare this word and find people discovering these unsearchable riches of Christ, the universal knowledge of the great

secret which explains how to unravel all human misery and heartache and problems, and, finally, that it should result in this tremendous demonstration which teaches the heavenly beings -- the angels, the demons, the principalities, the powers -- truths about God they would never know otherwise. No wonder Paul cried out in amazement at the glory of this mystery.

Now, this was the mystery which began to be revealed at Bethlehem, as there unfolded in that tiny human babe -- nestling on the bosom of his mother in the manger of a stable the full glory of what God has done for man. Perhaps you have never found Jesus Christ as your Lord. It is quite possible, of course, to have come to church regularly, and to have heard these truths over and over, but never to have made them personally yours. But their whole effect is lost until you, personally, are born again -- born into this new creation by faith in Jesus Christ. So you may desire, in the quiet and solitude of your own heart, simply to invite Jesus Christ in and to ask him to be your Lord and your Savior, your Redeemer and your King, this Christmas season.

## Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the marvelous story of your birth in Bethlehem, which brought you into our lonely, broken race. We thank you for the glory of this mystery which breaks the power of darkness, sets us free from the kingdom of Satan, and brings us into the kingdom of your love, loosens us from chains and habits which bind us and brings us into the liberty of the sons of God. We pray that we may not keep this secret to ourselves, but will gladly tell the story abroad to others, that they too may find the unsearchable riches of Christ. May our hearts, Lord, praise your name with such joy and thanksgiving that your heart is delighted, our Father, as you read the thoughts of our minds and the expressions of our hearts. May they be pleasing in your sight, so that, as you look at us, it may be as the angels sang so long ago: "Glory to God on the highest and on earth, peace among men with whom he is well pleased." We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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Title: Secret Riches  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Riches in Christ  
Scripture: Ephesians 3:7-13  
Message No: 16  
Catalog No: 3016  
Date: December 24, 1972

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