

Lesson 23

The Dispensation of Grace

As we concluded lesson 22, we saw that Israel had committed the unpardonable sin in Acts 7. The Gentiles had rebelled against God way back in Genesis 11. The time was now ripe for judgment. Yet we are now living hundreds of years later and God's judgment has still not come upon the earth! What happened after Acts 7? Why hasn't God poured out His wrath upon the earth after all these hundreds of years? The answer to these questions can be found in Paul's epistles.

A New Dispensation

We will study several passages in Paul's epistles. However, let us first briefly answer the questions posed above. Instead of pouring out His wrath after Stephen was stoned in Acts 7, God introduced a new dispensation---the dispensation of grace. Under the former dispensation, God would certainly have dealt with the earth in anger. [He will yet do this in the future.] However, in the new dispensation God would pour out His grace. God revealed a new message (the mystery) to Paul, the apostle. We are now living in the dispensation of grace; it has continued for about two thousand years already.

This present dispensation is much different from the previous dispensation:

Time Past

Law

Kingdom on earth promised

The chosen nation is Israel

The gospel of the kingdom

Now

Grace

The saved go to heaven

No nation is favored

The gospel of grace

We will now support this by considering several passages in Paul's epistles.

Paul and the Gentiles

In Romans 11:13, Paul wrote: "For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office." This is a very significant statement! No one else in the Bible claims to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was given a special message about the Gentiles. We learned in lesson 20 that Jesus Christ was not sent to the Gentiles, but only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). Paul, however, writes: "That I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles . . ." (Romans 15:15-16). Jesus Christ came to minister to "the circumcision" (Romans 15:8). Later, Jesus Christ sent Paul to minister to the Gentiles. If the Word of God says that Paul's office is magnified, we must not diminish it!

The Mystery

It is impossible to understand the Bible without understanding "the mystery." The word "mystery" in the Bible does not mean mysterious or strange. The mystery is a message previously hidden, but now made known. Read the following verse carefully and notice the meaning of the word "mystery." "Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25). No one in the Old Testament knew the mystery. Neither did the twelve apostles during Christ's ministry on earth. No one knew the mystery until it was revealed to Paul. It had been "kept secret since the world began."

Paul speaks of this mystery often. "Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints" (Read Colossians 1:24-27). God did not suddenly come up with a new plan in Acts 7. He had promised eternal life to Gentiles "before the world began" (Titus 1:2). (This was a promise that God made to Himself, since no one was present before the world began except the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.) God kept this a secret, "But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me [Paul] according to the commandment of God our Saviour" (Titus 1:3). Though planned before the world began, the dispensation of grace was not revealed until the proper time (the "due times"). God then committed this message to Paul. We will now study more about the content of "the mystery."

The Fall of Israel

Romans 11:11 tells us that Israel has fallen and "through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles." The fall of Israel has become "the riches of the world" (Romans 11:12). The "casting away" of Israel resulted in "the reconciling of the world" (Romans 11:15). Old Testament teaching is that salvation will come to the Gentiles through the *rise* of Israel (Isaiah 60:1-3). However, in Romans 11 Paul teaches that salvation has come to the Gentiles through the *fall* of Israel. This is something new! This is part of the mystery (Romans 11:25).

Why a Mystery?

Why did God keep a message secret since the world began; not revealing it to anyone before Paul? This is what Paul explains in I Corinthians. "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory; Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (I Corinthians 2:7-8). Satan is "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). When Jesus Christ was crucified, Satan and the other "princes of this world" thought that they had won the victory over Christ. They did not know that Christ's death would pay the penalty for all men's sins and open the way for salvation by grace for all men. Had Satan known about the salvation that the Cross would bring, he would have tried to prevent the crucifixion. However, Satan did not know this information! He did not learn about it from the Old Testament prophets, the twelve apostles, or anyone else. This knowledge was hidden, because God had not yet revealed the mystery! Satan fell into a trap set by the wisdom of God. Only later, when the mystery was revealed to Paul, did Satan realize that the Cross was not a victory for him, but was his greatest defeat in history! This is why God kept "the mystery" a secret for all those years.

There are many denominations, sects, and cults within Christendom. All of them claim to be preaching Jesus Christ. Yet, they have vastly different messages about the Lord. It is not enough simply to preach Jesus Christ. We must preach Jesus Christ "according to the revelation of the mystery" (Romans 16:25). Jesus Christ is no longer in a state of humiliation as He was when on earth. Today, He does not get tired or hungry. No one can spit upon Him, slap Him, place a crown of thorns on His head, or crucify Him today. He is now the risen and ascended Lord "far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Ephesians 1:21). He is now the Head of the Church, the Body of Christ. We learn all of this in the mystery!

[In the next two lessons we will study two very important passages concerning Paul and the mystery.]

Review Questions

True or False

1. Israel committed the unpardonable sin when the Jews crucified Christ.
2. There is very little difference between this dispensation and the previous dispensation.
3. You will never understand the Bible unless you understand the mystery revealed to Paul.
4. God favors Israel above all nations today.

Multiple Choice

5. We can know that a church is teaching the truth if:
 - a) they claim to be Christian
 - b) they teach about Jesus Christ
 - c) they preach Jesus Christ according to the mystery
 - d) they teach that Jesus Christ is Lord
6. After Israel stoned Stephen in Acts 7:
 - a) God introduced the dispensation of grace
 - b) God poured out His wrath on the earth
 - c) God established His kingdom on earth
 - d) They crucified the Lord
7. In Romans 11:13 Paul said:
 - a) that he was an apostle to Israel
 - b) that he was the apostle of the Gentiles

- c) that his office of apostleship was not important
- d) that Peter was the apostle of the Gentiles

Fill in the Blanks

- 8. The _____ was hidden until it was revealed to Paul.
- 9. "... for had they known it, they would not have _____ the Lord of glory" (I Corinthians 2:7-8).
- 10. The _____ rebelled against God in Genesis 11.

Lesson 24

The Dispensation of Grace--Part II

In this lesson we will devote our attention primarily to Ephesians 3:1-11. We will study this passage in some detail since it is a very important part of Scripture concerning the dispensation of grace.

Ephesians 3:1-11

Please read carefully Ephesians 3:1-11. We want to draw special attention to the following:

Verse two "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:"

The time in which we now live is properly called "the dispensation of the grace of God." Notice that this dispensation was given to Paul. It did not begin with the birth of Christ, nor with the death of Christ, nor in Acts chapter two. No one knew anything about the dispensation of grace until God revealed it to Paul. Paul uses the phrase "my gospel," referring to the gospel that was kept secret until revealed to him (Romans 16:25)¹.

Many Christians have heard something about certain churches that teach dispensationalism. Often, these Christians do not realize that the word "dispensational" is a word used in the Bible. What does this big word mean? The root word is "dispense" which means "to deal out; to distribute; to administer." Therefore a dispensation is "a distribution" or "an administration." In "time past," God distributed Law to the nation of Israel. In this dispensation, God is distributing grace to the nations. God ruled with an administration of Law in "time past." God is now ruling with an administration of grace. This is the meaning of the term "dispensation of the grace of God." It is a wonderful privilege to live in this dispensation of grace!

¹ See, also, Romans 2:16 and II Timothy 2:8

Verse three "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words,"

In verse three, Paul says "the mystery" was made known to him by a revelation from God. The dispensation of grace can also be called "the mystery" (See, also, Colossians 1:25-26). It is sad that many Christians have no idea what "the mystery" is, even though we are living in the time called "the mystery." No wonder so many are confused about God's will for their lives!

Verse five plainly states that the mystery "in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men," but is "now revealed." This is emphasized several times by Paul and is very important to a correct understanding of God's Word (Romans 16:25; Colossians 1:25-26).

Some have used Ephesians 3:5 to try to deny that the "mystery" was first made known to Paul. They say that God revealed it to Peter, James, John, and the other apostles because this verse says "as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." However, note the following:

a) Paul received "the mystery" by a direct revelation from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:12, Ephesians 3:3). The Bible does not say that anyone, other than Paul, came to know the mystery in this way. This makes Paul unique.

b) Colossians 1:23-27 says that the mystery "now is made manifest to his saints." The word "saints" is not referring only to the apostles. But how did the saints come to know the mystery? The context clearly shows that this knowledge came to the saints through Paul's ministry.

c) In our next lesson, we will study the first two chapters in Galatians. In those chapters we will see that Peter, James, and John came to an understanding of the mystery when Paul told them about the revelation that he had received. Prior to this the twelve apostles had no knowledge of the mystery.

d) Ephesians 3:5 not only mentions apostles, but also "prophets." The Old Testament prophets were dead long before the mystery was revealed to Paul. If we say that these prophets knew the mystery, we make nonsense out of statements such as: "the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" and "the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations" (Romans 16:25; Colossians 1:26). Something cannot be "kept secret" while it is being made known. The prophets in Ephesians 3:5 are not the Old Testament prophets (see note "e").

e) The "apostles and prophets" in Ephesians 3:5 are not the Old Testament prophets and the twelve apostles. Ephesians 4:11 tells us that God gave apostles and prophets to the Church, the Body of Christ. But *when* did He give these apostles and prophets? The context clearly teaches that these apostles and prophets were given *after* Christ ascended into heaven (Ephesians 4:8-11). The Old Testament prophets, however, were chosen before Christ was even born. Christ chose the twelve apostles while He was still on earth (before His crucifixion). The apostles and

prophets in Ephesians are a special group of apostles and prophets given to the Church, the Body of Christ. They were used by God to lay the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20)².

f) How did this special group of apostles and prophets get a knowledge of the mystery? Ephesians 3:5 says that it was revealed to them "by the Spirit." There are two possible meanings to this phrase. First we know that the Holy Spirit spoke through Paul in his preaching and writing. Therefore, when others understood the mystery through Paul's epistles or preaching, we could say they gained this knowledge "by the Spirit." A second possibility is that after Jesus Christ revealed the mystery to Paul by direct revelation, the Holy Spirit gave these apostles and prophets the gift of knowledge to understand the mystery (I Corinthians 12:8).

g) We can definitely conclude that Paul, alone, received the "mystery" by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. For a while, Paul was the only human having this knowledge. Even after others gained this knowledge, Paul held a special position as the apostle chosen by God to make this mystery known through the writing of his epistles.

There are some who use Ephesians 3:5 in another way in an attempt to deny what the Bible teaches about the mystery. This verse says that the mystery was not made known in the past "as it is now revealed." Therefore, there are some who teach that the mystery was partially revealed in the past, but is now fully revealed. In other words, the mystery was not fully made known in the past "as it is now [fully] revealed." However, Romans 16:25 and Colossians 1:25-26 make it clear that the mystery was never revealed (not even partially) until it was revealed to Paul. The meaning of Ephesians 3:5 is that the mystery was not revealed at all in past ages, but has now been made known.

Verse eight "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;"

Let us focus on the phrase "the unsearchable riches of Christ." The word "unsearchable" is often interpreted to mean that the riches of Christ are so wonderful that we cannot comprehend them. It is true, of course, that the riches of Christ are marvelously wonderful. However, that is not truly the meaning of the word "unsearchable" in this verse. The word "unsearchable" means "cannot be searched out." The riches of Christ revealed in the mystery could not be found (or searched out) in the Old Testament. Thus, this verse, again, emphasizes that the mystery was unknown until revealed to Paul.

verse nine "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:"

Believers today are not called to have fellowship based upon some denomination or a particular doctrine. Our fellowship is to be based upon the revelation of the mystery. Again, it is sad that many Christians don't even know what we are talking about when we mention "the mystery."

² These apostles and prophets are mentioned in several verses such as: Acts 14:14 (Barnabas); Philippians 2:25 (Epaphroditus); I Thessalonians 1:1 cf. 2:6 (Silvanus and Timothy).

Therefore, we must call them into "the fellowship of the mystery." Notice, again, the emphasis on the mystery being unknown in the past. It was not hid in the Old Testament, but was "hid in God."

Application Look back at lesson 15. You should now clearly understand the solution to many verses in the Bible that may seem contradictory. When we study circumcision, healing, eating pork, the Sabbath, speaking in tongues, and many other topics, we will find that the teaching in Paul's epistles is different from the teaching in the other books in the Bible. Paul received a new revelation (the mystery) for the dispensation of grace. This new dispensation differs in many ways from the previous dispensation. This is why we must rightly divide the Scriptures (II Timothy 2:15). We must place all Bible teachings in their proper place: a) "time past"

or

b) "now" (the dispensation of grace or the mystery)

or

c) "the ages to come."

[In the next lesson we will study another passage that is vital in gaining a correct understanding of the dispensation of grace.]

Review Questions

True or False

1. The dispensation of the grace of God was first made known to Peter.
2. All churches that teach dispensationalism are teaching false doctrine.
3. Paul came to know "the mystery" by studying the Old Testament.
4. There are some who twist the meaning of Ephesians 3:5 to deny that the mystery was first made known to Paul.

Multiple Choice

5. Colossians 1:23-27 teaches that the saints understand the mystery through:
 - a) The Old Testament books
 - b) The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
 - c) The whole Bible
 - d) The ministry of Paul
6. The apostles and prophets mentioned in Ephesians 3:5:
 - a) Are still living
 - b) Are not the Old Testament prophets nor the twelve apostles
 - c) Are the Old Testament prophets and the twelve apostles
 - d) Are false apostles and prophets

7. The apostles and prophets mentioned in Ephesians 3:5 could have gained a knowledge of the mystery:

- a) Through studying the Old Testament
- b) By direct revelation from Jesus Christ
- c) Through Paul's preaching and writing
- d) By receiving the "gift of knowledge"

Fill in the Blanks

8. Romans 16:25 and Colossians 1:25-27 teach that the mystery was unknown until it was revealed to ____.

9. According to Ephesians 3:8, the _____ riches of Christ can only be found in Paul's epistles.

10. Our fellowship, as believers, is to be based upon the fellowship of the _____.

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