

Ephesians 3: 8-11; “The Fellowship of the Mystery”, Message # 21 in a series entitled – “The Exceeding Greatness of His Power”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on April 21st, 2024, in the Morning Worship Service.

The apostle Paul in these verses continues to rejoice in the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to him, to understand the mystery of Christ. It was a great privilege which was given to him, to have this mystery made known to him by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the same body in the New Testament Church. And that they should be made partakers of God’s promise in Christ through the gospel. Truly, it was a very great privilege which was accorded to Paul, to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ. And yet, the apostle was, at that very time that he said this, in prison. You would hardly know it, however, by the way that he was speaking here.

And so what I want to relate to you now, are the truths that sustained the apostle Paul, during this time, so that he would not lose heart. These are the same truths that would sustain the church at Ephesus during their time of uncertainty, concerning what would happen to their beloved apostle Paul. These are the same truths that will sustain our hearts during any time of uncertainty that we will pass through in the future. These truths make up the fellowship of the mystery of Christ which all believers, together, have in Christ.

1st of all – There is a fellowship in our attitude that we have in understanding the mystery of Christ. (verse 8)

It is the attitude of deep humility. “To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mercy, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.” We have here an expression which is really quite amazing coming from the one who had been given so much knowledge concerning Christ. Paul terms himself “less than the least of all the saints”.

Not just the least of the saints, but less than the least of them. We must explore this view that Paul had of himself, and think of how we think of ourselves. Now, we must ask – Did Paul have too low a view of himself when he said this? No, I would declare to you that he had a very realistic view of himself, the kind of view that every Christian ought to have of themselves. Well, how did Paul get to this place where he saw himself this way? I believe that the Scriptures tell us that he came to this view of himself through comparing himself with Christ, not with other people around him.

Let me explain. Paul’s view of himself was that he was a man who was unworthy of the Lord’s having rescued him from his own false view of himself; the view that he had of himself before his conversion. The view that he had of himself, then, was that he was blameless, when he was really a great sinner. You see, Paul was a man who had great confidence in the flesh. Listen to Philippians 3, verses 1-6. “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.” “For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe.” “Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!”

“For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh.” “If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

So here we see the way that Paul thought of himself before he was converted. He did not think it tedious to write of these things over and over again to the brethren because they were so important. He tells them to beware of dogs, evil workers, and the mutilation. What is he talking about? He is talking about Jewish men who were trusting in their own righteousness, both to save themselves by it, and then to show forth the supposed fact that they were better people than other people around them because of their outward righteousness. These people, himself included at that time, had a very high view of themselves. They had great confidence in themselves that they were pleasing to God because they were Jews who had been circumcised according to the law. They thought that

circumcision was of the essence of true religion. All Hebrews to them were God's true people if they followed the ceremonial law and attempted to keep the moral law to the best of their ability; that is according to their own evaluation of themselves.

Actually, it was living with this mindset which made them dogs and evil workers. They continually focused their attention on the flesh. That is, they focused on what a man was able to do according to his own evaluation of himself in accordance with the standard of the law. But what did this lead to? It led to total self-deception. Paul thought himself to really be someone great because of his lineage. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He thought that he had attained to a great degree in theology because he was a Pharisee.

He thought that he knew the Scriptures because he searched them regularly. He thought that he had eternal life by his own supposed good works. But something very great and important was missing. He was very far from really knowing the Lord because he did not have Christ. He did not want to hear about Christ, who was the only truly righteous man who ever lived. He thought that he was righteous in himself. No, the more that Paul compared himself with other men, he thought that he was a cut above all of them. He had zeal, so much so, that he persecuted the church of Christ. He looked at his behavior, and he thought that he was blameless in regard to the law. But actually, at that time, he was one of these dogs that he was warning the Philippians to beware of.

What I want you to see is that when Christ saved Paul, that his view of himself completely changed. He no longer had confidence in the flesh; that is, his own way of looking at himself and other people. He became humble and self-effacing. He says in verses 7-9 – “But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.” “Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ.”

Paul was seeing things correctly now. The object was not to think of himself in a self-righteous, self-confident way; that everything he thought about himself, and what he was doing, was right because he had compared himself with the law, and he did not find anything against himself. Before he was saved he could only think that he was doing many right and righteous things. If he only knew, he was actually falling far short of God's glory. Because, it was all self-centered. It had nothing to do with God's true evaluation of him.

But when he was converted, Christ became everything to him. The things that were gain to him, these he counted as loss for Christ. And indeed, he says, he counted all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. He was willing to suffer the loss of all things, and he actually did suffer the loss of all things related to seeing himself as someone great. He had thought that he was someone who was always doing what was right according to the law. Now why does Paul relate all this to the Philippian believers, and to us? It is because he wants us to take this same view of ourselves as he did. He wants us to have this humble view of ourselves. He would have us to see ourselves as less than the least of the saints. When you see yourself this way, you will stop comparing yourself with others and compare yourself only with Christ.

2nd – That there is a fellowship with all the saints in the mystery of Christ.

(verses 8b and 9)

“...That I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ, to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord...” This phrase, “the unsearchable riches of Christ” speaks to us of the fact that not one of us can take into our minds how infinitely great and extensive, and how all comprehending, these riches of Christ are. They include the riches of God's goodness, His forbearance, and His longsuffering, Paul says in Romans chapter 2, verse 4.

God's goodness extends to all men in His providing everything that they need, and more importantly it says there that His showing men His goodness and kindness ought to lead them to repentance. These unsearchable riches of Christ are also spoken of in Colossians chapter 1, verses 26-28, as "the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints." "To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which Christ in you, the hope of glory." "Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ Jesus."

We can think of this on the national level. How many years has God showed us His goodness and kindness and patience, but has it led us as a nation to repentance? No, not much; not many people are thinking of their sins in His sight. Not many are practicing righteousness. And so He gives us a taste of His judgment upon our nation in the coronavirus a few years ago. And why did He do that? He did it so that we might turn back to Him. But have we turned back to Him? Amos chapter 4, verse 10 says – "I sent among you a plague after the manner of Egypt;...Yet you have not returned to Me, says the Lord." The fellowship of the mystery is that all people should know that when they repent, that they will find the forgiveness of their sins. They will find that grace which will enable them to do His will, to His glory.

When you come to Christ you are given a New Heart, and when you repent of your sins you will be forgiven, through faith in Christ that is. The mystery of Christ is, that even though you have repented once at the beginning, when you first came to Christ, that you also, in time, come to know that you need to keep on repenting of the sins of your heart and actions each and every day, when you find sins in your thoughts and actions. This is one of the ways that you will have fellowship with Christ. "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin." (1st John 1: 7)

And 1st Kings 8: 37-40 says – "When there is famine in the land, pestilence or blight or mildew, locusts or grasshoppers; when their enemy besieges the in the land of their cities; whatever plague or whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever supplication is made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple: then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive, and act, and give to everyone according to all his ways, whose heart You know (for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men), that they may fear You all the days that they live in the land which You gave to our fathers."

When you know "the plague of your own heart", as it says in verse 38, and you regularly confess your sins to God through Jesus Christ your Lord, you are given a clean heart, and a right spirit. And you are renewed in your heart day by day when you confess your need of these things in the name of the Lord Jesus. This is the fellowship of the mystery of Christ. Even though we do not live in the Old Testament times of Israel being the only nation in covenant with God, and even though we do not need to spread out our hands towards any physical temple, still we need to be confessing the sins of our nation before God that He might bless us.

In 2nd Chronicles 7: 13 and 14, God says – "When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." You see, there is a fellowship of the mystery of Christ, in that all Christians everywhere should understand that God is concerned with the salvation of nations as well as He is with individual people.

God is concerned with Gentiles as well as He is with Jews. He is concerned with the people of all countries that they come to faith in His Son. And, we need to know this and preach this, that our God has great plans to show all nations, and all people, the glory of His great salvation in Christ. All things, it says in Colossians 1: 16 were created through Him and for Him. In verse 9 of our text Paul says, "and to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ. And so, for all people and

nations of people which God through Christ saves, and brings into His kingdom, they are shown the riches of God's wisdom and mercy in every aspect of their salvation, and thus they are being conformed to the image of Christ.

God does all these spiritually transformative things through Christ in terms of making all things new, since the Fall of man took place. And it will continue until the end of the world. Paul states that it was his task as a preacher to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in Christ. It is a fellowship, it is a participation, in which men and nations and angels all share in.

3rd – There is a fellowship in the mystery of Christ, which all the saints have with the angels. (verses 10 and 11)

“...To the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The good angels, we are told in Hebrews chapter 1, verse 14, are God's ministering spirits sent forth to minister, or render help or aid, to those people who will inherit salvation. And these verses in Ephesians are telling us that the manifold wisdom of God is being made known by the church to them. You see an example of this in the case of Lot, when he and his family were being brought out of Sodom by angels before the city was destroyed.

You see another example in Jacob before he crossed the river Jabbok in Genesis 32, being greeted by the Mahanaim, or the two companies of angels. In both of these situations the manifold wisdom of God was seen in His mercy upon those who belonged to God, and His judgment upon those who did not; the angels learning of the just and holy ways of God, and no doubt marveling over it. For angels are learning in this holy way, from the way that God leads and deals with His saints; how He teaches them, and how He builds faith in their lives. This is the fellowship of the mystery which is beheld by men and angels; even shared in together.

This mystery applies to God's providential watchcare over nations as well. In Daniel chapter 8 Daniel saw a mighty vision of what would happen to the Macedonian or Greek Empire, and how long it would last. But in verse 15 it says – “Then it happened, when I, Daniel, had seen the vision and was seeking the meaning, that suddenly there stood before me one having the appearance of man.” “And I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai, who called and said, ‘Gabriel, make this man understand the vision.’” “So he came near where I stood, and when he came I was afraid and fell on my face; but he said to me, ‘Understand, son of man, that the vision refers to the time of the end.’” Later in verse 25 it says – “Through his cunning he shall cause deceit to prosper under his rule; and he shall exalt himself in his heart.” “He shall destroy many in their prosperity.” “He shall even rise against the prince of princes; but he shall be broken without human means.”

And so Daniel prophesied of these things, but you see just how much fellowship this angel and Daniel were having in the mystery of Christ. God according to His infinite wisdom, in relation to His eternal purposes, not only saves multitudes of people from their sins and brings them into His everlasting kingdom through Christ, but He also guides and governs the nations on the earth; sets up kings and takes them down at His pleasure. But the Lord Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords, and He will one day come back and judge the world in righteousness.

A part of that judgment will consist in His confessing us before the angels. That is, if we were not ashamed to confess Him before men. Luke 12: 8 – “Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God.” “But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” Jesus also says in Luke 15: 10 – “Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents!” Therefore, we should use our time wisely, when God brings His earthly temporal judgments. We should examine ourselves to see whether we be in the faith. We should confess and repent of all of our sins. And we should marvel over our fellowship in the mystery of Christ.

