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The Most Important Unknown Chapter In the Bible

BY RICHARD JORDAN

Because it is one of the first chapters I memorized as a young believer, it has long amazed me how “unknown” Ephesian 3 remains. In reality, it is one of the most *important* unknown chapters in all of God’s word.

After detailing the dispensational change necessary for the formation of the Body of Christ (Eph. 2:11-22), Paul immediately addresses the “*mystery*” aspect of this change, and he seems to anticipate this lack of attention as he says,

“For this cause I Paul the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

“IF YE HAVE HEARD of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward” (Eph. 3:1, 2).

He then proceeds to challenge this ignorance by detailing *where* we fit into God’s overall program (vs. 3-5), *who* we are (v. 6) and *what* God is doing and *why* (vs. 7-12). Let’s look briefly at this:

WHERE WE FIT IN

“How that BY REVELATION HE MADE KNOWN UNTO ME THE MYSTERY; (as I wrote afore in few words,

“Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

“WHICH IN OTHER AGES WAS NOT MADE KNOWN UNTO THE SONS OF MEN, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:3-5).

Here is a clear declaration that there are two distinct programs in God’s word—one “*made know by the mouth of all the holy prophets since the world began,*” as Peter said of his message (Acts 3:18-21, cf Luke 1:69, 70); while the other was revealed first to Paul and was previously a “*mystery, which was kept secret since the world began*” (Rom. 16:25, 26, cf. Col. 1:25-27), and thus “*in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men*” (v. 5).

This is the most basic division in the Bible—the distinction between prophecy (“that which has been made known since the world began”) and the mystery (“that which was kept secret since the world began”). As I have often said, “A six-year-old who flunked kindergarten can understand this!” The sad truth is, one must ignore the Bible and allow religious tradition to capture your thinking in order to fail to acknowledge this fundamental division in God’s dealings.

Notice how Paul tells us we will understand the mystery revealed by Christ to him *by reading* what he has written:

“AS I WROTE afore in few words, whereby WHEN YE READ, YE MAY UNDERSTAND my knowledge in the mystery of Christ” (vs. 3, 4).

Thus, regardless of one’s claims to believe the Bible, failure to see the distinction between Israel’s program of prophecy and the Body of Christ’s program in the mystery comes directly from the failure to *personally read the Bible text itself*. Paul wrote Timothy,

“Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things” (II Tim. 2:7).

It is as we *consider*—as we read and think hard about “*the word of the Lord*” committed to Paul and through him to us that we gain such understanding. Do not fail to note Ephesians 3:3’s statement that the mystery was revealed *directly* by Christ to Paul, and verse 5’s statement that it is “*now revealed by the Spirit*” to others. It is as we actually “*read*” and “*consider*” (and *believe!*) Christ’s revelation to Paul that the Holy Spirit illuminates our “understanding of all things.”

This is the key to rightly dividing God’s word and dispelling the confusion caused by mixing these two programs. Recognizing the distinction between Israel and the Body of Christ, Law and Grace, the Rapture and Second Coming, the gospel of the Circumcision and gospel of the Uncircumcision, etc.

For example, the long-standing confusion over Paul’s statement in Romans 4:3 and James’ assertion in James 2:24 can only truly be resolved by recognizing Paul’s

statement came from *the apostle of the Gentiles* (Rom. 11:13), while James clearly states he was writing “*to the twelve tribes*” of Israel (Jas. 1:1). Understanding this underlying difference in these programs explains the different instructions and why they fit their respective audiences.

Then there is our Lord’s clear instructing His disciples to pray, “*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*” and going on to declare this is the *only* way to obtain forgiveness (Matt. 6:13-15). In stark contrast, Paul writes the Colossians,

“Forebearing one another: and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any, **EVEN AS CHRIST FORGAVE YOU, SO ALSO DO YE.**”

For a sincere believer seeking to follow the Lord, this is a serious question of which instructions to follow! Only recognizing the different programs involved has the answer.

Again, the question of the security of the believer is on the table: considering our Lord’s instructions in Matthew 24:13—“*he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved*”—or Hebrews 3:6, 14 proclaiming the necessity to “*holdfast...unto the end,*” this seems a settled issue. *But* then we come to Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30 where Paul informs us we have been “*sealed with the holy Spirit...unto the day of redemption,*” and assures us that nothing can “separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom. 8:35-39)—and we are again faced with the question: Which instructions apply to us?

The list could go on and on with illustrations of the simple fact that there is more than one program in God’s word. Once we “understand” *where* our program is

located in the Bible—i.e., in Paul’s writings—we are ready to more fully understand just *who* we are as members of the Body of Christ.

WHO WE ARE

“That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (3:6).

As saints of the true and living God, in the dispensation of grace we are a part of “*the mystery of Christ*” (v. 4)—the unprophesied body of believing Jews and Gentiles baptized by the Holy Spirit into oneness with Jesus Christ. I Corinthians 12:12-13 details our “*one baptism*,”

“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.”

Believers have been so fully identified with Christ in His death, burial, resurrection and current session at the Father’s right hand (Rom. 6:3-6, Eph. 2:5-6; 1:19-23) that we are said to be “*one with Him*.” When we were “*in Adam*,” everything that belonged to Adam belonged to us. Now that we are “*in Christ*,” everything that belongs to Him belongs to us. It is a matter of our new identity in Christ!

In the context, Paul points out that we have been made “*fellowheirs*” (we share *His* inheritance—2:19; 1:11, 14, 18), we are members of the “*same body*” (equal participants—1:3-6; 2:16), and are *partakers of His eternal promise* (participants in the Father’s “eternal purpose” which He planned

“before the world began” (1:9-10; 3:11, Tit. 1:2-3)—and all this *by the gospel*!

And it is this point—*by the gospel*—that explains why this was kept secret since the world began. Consider Paul’s words in I Corinthians 2:7-8,

“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.”

Thus it was that God took the so-called “*wise in his own craftiness*,” as Paul goes on to write:

“For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, for it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness” (I Cor. 3:19).

Had the Adversary known the fullness of what was to be accomplished by the cross, he would not have so eagerly participated in his own demise. Little wonder the enemy hates the message of grace so viciously!

WHAT GOD IS DOING TODAY

“Whereof I was made a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

“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:

“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” (3:7-9).

Paul’s passion is beautifully expressed under two headings: first, *to preach*

the unsearchable riches of Christ (“unsearchable” in the sense of John 5:39—i.e., it will not be found outside Paul’s writings; and also in the sense of Romans 11:33—i.e., they are *unfathomable* riches whose depth will never be reached, even in the “ages to come”); and “to make all men see the fellowship of the mystery” (i.e., to put on open, public display the reality of the life of Christ working through His Body).

The Apostle clearly understood that by means of the church, the Body of Christ, Father’s ultimate purpose—His “*eternal purpose in Christ Jesus*”—is being thus set forth, so he continues by declaring:

“To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

“According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vs. 10-11).

What Paul is setting forth—and what too many are ignorant about—is the reality that saints today are part of something *big* (it fills heaven and earth), *glorious* (it manifests the exceeding riches of His grace) and *eternal* (it was planned “*before the world began*” and will last through all the “*ages to come*”). This, in fact, has been Father’s plan all along, as set forth in the very opening of this grand epistle. Speaking of the Father, Paul writes:

“Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence;

“Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he purposed in himself:

“That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him.

“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to

the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (1:8-11).

This is what Ephesians 3 is about: understanding what God is accomplishing in the “mystery” program—His eternal purpose in Christ Jesus. And putting it on display through us! And the second half of the chapter sets forth what could be called “the Bible’s Most Unused Resource”—but that will be for a future study!

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My faith in Christ my hope and creed:
By the grace of God my Savior died,
By grace through faith I'm justified!

—J.C. O'Hair

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