HABAKKUK 2:14

THE MYSTERY OF THE GOSPEL

God's Mercy Strategy for the Nations



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No one would have guessed
that the God of the ages
would become a man
and become the sacrifice,
so that the earth itself
could become the Holy of Holies.

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Part One

The Knowledge of God

> *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. (Luke 2:14)*

The Central Issue of the Gospel

The gospel is not only how we entered the kingdom. It is how we live and how we see. This teaching holds two lines: the gospel as a way of life and a way of seeing the world, and the centrality of Jesus. Those two lines run through these pages.

When Jesus was born, angels appeared to shepherds in Luke 2 and said a most glorious sentence: glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men. That is what the gospel is. It is a message and a plan from the heart of God for the human race: peace, joy, and goodwill toward men. That peace is how we feel, our spiritual condition, society, politics, the environment, and the whole universe. The gospel is not merely a personal salvation experience. It is the whole plan God has for the human race.

Before the components of that plan, the central issue is the knowledge of God: knowing who He is. It is the understanding, the expounding, of God's personality. The technical word for that personality is His attributes. He is merciful, righteous, holy, just. He is powerful. He is jealous. He is King, Judge, and Bridegroom. These are attributes, not characteristics you can isolate. They describe the entirety of who He is. Because they are the entirety of who He is, He is all of them at once. He does not suspend one in order to exercise another. A. W. Tozer's The Knowledge of the Holy is a simple book that serves this subject well.

The knowledge of God is also the knowledge of His power, of what He is capable of doing. In Ephesians 1:17–19 Paul prays that the church would receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation, and that by the Spirit the church would know three things. One of those three is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe. In that context it is resurrection power.

> *That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe. (Ephesians 1:17–19)*

So the knowledge of God is not only personality. It is ability: the power of the resurrection, the power to heal, to save, to deliver, the power of creation in Genesis 1 as He spoke the worlds into existence, and His power to establish the new heavens and the new earth.

Third, the knowledge of God is the knowledge of His purpose. What is He up to? What is happening in history? Are the events of history of consequence, or are they inconsequential? The gospel says they are of consequence. There is a real design and a real end to human history, and God is behind it. He is driving it.

We were created for relationship, for that intimate knowing of who God is. In Genesis 1 a curious thing happens. God says, Let there be light, and there is light, yet there is no sun and no moon until the fourth day. Where is the light coming from? It is the light of God's glory breaking in. In Revelation 21 John sees the New Jerusalem filled with light. There is no sun and no moon. The glory of God and the Lamb are the light of the city. From the first day God is making a statement: I am making everything so that creation would be filled with My glory, and so that humans would know who I am.

> *For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)*

Paul pulls Genesis 1 into the gospel. The same God who commanded light in the dark is the One who commands the light that shines from the face of Christ upon the heart. The prophets say the end of that purpose out loud. Habakkuk 2:14: the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Isaiah 6: the angels say the whole earth is full of His glory. Numbers 14:21: the earth will be filled with His glory. Right now the earth is mostly filled with darkness. The good news is that God has a plan to drive that darkness out and to fill the created order with the understanding of His personality, His power, and His purpose.

The knowledge of God is the most important thing about us. Tozer's point is compelling: the ideas we have in our minds about God are the most important things about us. We are created in the image of God. One aspect of that image is that we reflect who He is according to our understanding of Him. A right understanding affects the reflection. That is why this is the number one thing the enemy seeks to undermine in the heart and the mind. The gospel is the revelation of God, the unveiling of who He is. That is the central message of Scripture.

Most stories begin by naming the main character. Scripture does the same. Instead of once upon a time it says, In the beginning, God. God is the protagonist. From Genesis to Revelation the Word unfolds who He is through His words, His actions, His decisions, and the way He responds when people respond to Him or refuse Him. You begin to feel with Him. You take His side. That is the central reason we were created.

> *For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God. (2 Corinthians 10:4–5)*

In that context Paul is talking about his preaching. Strongholds in 2 Corinthians are mindsets that set themselves up against the understanding of who God is. Knowing the gospel and preaching the gospel means declaring to the church and to the nations the truth of who God is. It challenges false presuppositions about His glory, His beauty, His majesty, and His motive: that He would establish peace on earth and goodwill toward men.

The Gospel as the Reign of the King

Elections make the point in a thin way. Officials promise to make a people happy. Slogans change. The claim underneath them is happiness. In a far deeper way that is what the gospel is doing. Jesus is not only a spiritual king. He is the ruler of the world. Political, environmental, cosmic, everything is under His leadership, and He has a message: I have a plan designed to bring joy to the world, peace on earth, and goodwill toward men.

If the gospel is summarized in one sentence, it is this: the leadership of God manifested through Christ in the earth. His mercy strategy is to drive out darkness and fill the whole creation with the knowledge of His glory.

> *The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. (Isaiah 52:10)*

The messengers proclaim good news: your God reigns. In Acts 17 the apostles are charged with declaring that there is a king, and that king is Jesus. The word gospel means good news, but it was not first a religious term. It was a political term in the Greco-Roman empire, used to establish and proclaim the reigning of a king. They did not have instant communication. They had birds and horses. Messengers went out. Knowing who is in charge tells a people that someone is at the helm.

The word was used in three settings. When a king and his bride had a son, a crowned prince, messengers went through the empire: we have an heir; government will continue. When the king went to war, kings in those days

went to the front themselves, and when he came back victorious, messengers went out: he won, he is alive, he is still in charge. When the old king died and the crowned prince became king, the message went out: there is a king reigning.

Those messengers were not asking permission. They were not offering yes, no, or maybe. The gospel they carried was a commandment, a call to loyalty and obedience. Caesar is lord. Acknowledge him. Pledge loyalty. When Jesus says He will send messengers through the world to preach the gospel, those are aggressive, fighting, treasonous words in that culture.

> *These who have turned the world upside down have come here too… saying there is another king, Jesus. (Acts 17:6–7)*

Paul writes one of the most intense sentences in the letter to Rome: I long to come to you that I might preach the gospel to you also. Rome is Caesar's backyard. It is Nero's backyard. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel. He will not hesitate to make it known even there that there is another king, and that Caesar himself will bow his knees to that king. When the apostles declared the gospel they were in direct confrontation with the governmental structures of Rome. The gospel was a spiritual reality and a political reality. It called the empire to shift loyalty, affection, and dedication from Nero to Jesus Christ.

Today the gospel is often presented as if it were a modern invitation you can answer later. It is an invitation in one sense. It is not that kind of invitation. The invitations of ancient kings were not optional. In Acts 17:30 Paul tells the philosophers in Athens that God overlooked ignorance for a time, but now, since Christ has come, since His death, burial, and resurrection, God commands men everywhere to repent. He commands them to submit their lives to the leadership of His appointed King, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

> *Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:30)*

> *In flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thessalonians 1:8)*

When Jesus returns He comes with flaming fire against those who do not obey the gospel. The gospel is the proclamation of the reign of a king, and a call to the nations to shift every other loyalty solely to the Man Christ Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Father, give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of You. Let the light that shone in the darkness shine from the face of Christ upon our hearts. Make us loyal to the King You have appointed. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions

Part One

1. What three things does this study include in the knowledge of God?
2. What announcement do the angels make in Luke 2:14, and how far does that peace reach?
3. Why does Genesis 1 have light before the sun and moon, and how does 2 Corinthians 4:6 use that scene?
4. What does Tozer mean when he says the most important thing about us is our idea of God?
5. How was the word gospel used in the Greco-Roman world, and why was Jesus' use of it treasonous?
6. What does it mean that the gospel is the leadership of God manifested through Christ in the earth?
7. How do Acts 17:6–7 and Paul's desire to preach in Rome show the political weight of the message?
8. Where have you treated the gospel as a maybe-invitation rather than a command to repent and shift loyalty?
9. What false idea of God is the gospel confronting in you right now?
10. How will you give yourself this week to knowing His personality, His power, and His purpose?

Part Two

The Promise and the Mystery

> *In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:3)*

The Promise

A sequel can be watched without the first film. You can follow the plot and even enjoy it. You will not feel what the later scenes are doing, because those scenes are answering a story you have not seen. Starting in the Gospel of John without Genesis is that kind of watching. John will take you into deep places, and you can get a general sense of what is happening. Much of the New Testament still does not fully make sense unless we give ourselves to the Old Testament beginning in Genesis. The angels' announcement of peace on earth is the flowering of a promise God made to Abraham and unpacked through the Law and the Prophets.

In the garden God covers Adam and Eve with animal skins. That is the first shedding of blood for sin, and He covers their shame. Then He gives a consequence. Redemption and judgment stand together. Cain kills Abel. He will wander, and God marks him so that he is not destroyed. Noah's generation has evil in the heart continually. The flood is judgment. The ark is redemption. Then Genesis 11. Humanity gathers to build a tower and make a name for itself. God confuses the speech and scatters the nations. Where is the redemption? Genesis 12. Joshua 24:3 says Abraham's house served other gods. Abraham is best read as a man still in the brick and mortar of Babel. God in kindness says, I choose you. Leave your father's house. I have a purpose for you.

The first word is, I will make your name great. That is what Babel grasped for. God is saying, I do not mind you having a great name. I want to be the One who gives it. Then: I will make you a blessing, and in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Which nations? The nations of Genesis 11, the nations He scattered in judgment. The Abrahamic covenant is the choosing of a people, a land for that people, and the blessing of the nations through that people.

> *I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing… and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12:2–3)*

The Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7) reaffirms the Abrahamic covenant and adds this: David's seed will be king forever. The New Covenant ensures the full outworking of both. The apostles presented the gospel by naming those

covenants, the seed of Abraham or the seed of David. Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to Paul's gospel (2 Timothy 2:8). The resurrection confirmed what had already been declared: He is the Son of God. Paul quotes Psalm 2 in Acts 13:33–34. The resurrection was not a mere resuscitation. It was the birthing of another age. Through it the Son of David is installed as the everlasting King who will lead Israel and the nations into the fullness of the Abrahamic promise.

The seed must be held in tension: Christ as the premiere inheritor, Abraham's natural seed, ethnic Israel, and Gentiles who are in Christ and become partakers of the promises. The promises remain Israel's. We are grafted in as partakers.

As the Old Testament continues, the promise is filled in. Numbers 14:21, Habakkuk 2:14, and Isaiah 6:3 declare that the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. Glory is the revelation of His power, His personality, and His purpose. Isaiah 60–66 shows that this is not only light and sound. There is perfume. The senses are involved. There are also real implications. Society is ordered. The environment is healed. Finances are handled justly. There is urban safety. Nations trade without hostility over the resources they possess. Racial hostility ends. Poverty is removed. There is equality and justice. Hostility between animals, and between humans and animals, ends. The broken things of the created order will function beautifully. The smells of the earth will be filled with perfume.

Then the Law arrives. Israel is shown to be sinful. Leviticus gives sacrifices so that communion can continue. The tabernacle has three chambers. The last is the Holy of Holies. Do not enter except the high priest, once a year, with blood for himself and for the people. God promised Abraham and the prophets that He would fill the earth with His glory. Any thinking Israelite would ask, You will not let us into a room once a year. How then will You permeate the whole earth with Your glory for us to dwell in?

> *But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built! (1 Kings 8:27)*

Solomon is stumped at the dedication of the temple. The promise is that God will end racism, corruption, immorality, environmental ruin, and hostility among creatures, and fill the earth with His presence. The question is how, when we cannot enter a box where His glory resides without dying. That question is the doorway to the mystery.

The First Unveiling

The first major unveiling of the mystery appears in Daniel 2. Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the great image and the stone cut without hands is not merely a political timeline. It is the revelation of a secret that had been kept in the heart of God. Daniel blesses the God of heaven because the secret was revealed to him (Daniel 2:19–23). The kingdoms of this world will be shattered. The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, a kingdom that fills the whole earth. That is the same vision that later fuels Paul's language of the mystery. The completion of the gospel is not limited to personal forgiveness or domestic blessing. It includes the completion of God's eternal plan for all of creation, the kingdom of God established on the earth under the Son of David.

The Mystery

Paul speaks of the mystery kept secret since the foundation of the world (Romans 16:25–27). John hears that in the days of the seventh trumpet the mystery of God will be finished (Revelation 10:7). In 1 Corinthians 2:7 he calls it the hidden wisdom. Hidden wisdom and the mystery are the same thing.

The mystery is not mysterious. There are many mysteries. Deuteronomy 29:29: the things God has revealed belong to us and to our children; the things He has not revealed belong to Him. When Paul says the mystery, he is not talking about all unknowns. He is talking about the thing kept hidden in the heart of God before the foundation of the earth that has now been made plain by the Spirit to the apostles and stands in the Scripture. It used to be inaccessible. Through Christ's death, burial, and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Spirit, it is revealed.

The mystery is the plan of how God will accomplish the promise. How will He fill the earth with His glory? How will He end racism, poverty, immorality, and pride? Paul says this has been revealed to the saints (Ephesians 3; Colossians 1). Jesus does not use the word mystery in Matthew 11, but He is talking about it when He thanks the Father that these things are hidden from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes. Solomon, the wisest man of the old covenant, could not see it. Jesus rejoices that the Father is putting the plan on display. Ephesians 1:8 says God did this with all wisdom, prudence, and pleasure. The first fruit of seeing it is joy, a sense of well-being: everything will be okay, because this plan is dear to God's holy heart.

Summed in one reality, the mystery is the cross. No one would have guessed that the God of the ages would become a man and become the sacrifice, so that the earth itself could become the Holy of Holies, the dwelling of His glory

forever. In the old covenant the high priest entered with blood. The mystery is that God Himself becomes the high priest and sheds His own royal blood for the earth. None of the rulers of this age understood that (1 Corinthians 2:8).

When Jesus said, It is finished (John 19:30), He was not speaking only of the availability of personal salvation and forgiveness. He was declaring that everything necessary for the full unfolding of the Father's plan had been secured. From the cross forward, the entire trajectory of history, personal redemption, the joining of heaven and earth, the making of the one new man, the salvation of Israel, and the filling of the earth with the knowledge of God's glory, was made possible. The cross triggered the unfolding of the mystery. Messengers of understanding in the last days will be messengers of the cross who grasp both its personal and its cosmic dimensions.

Seven Components

There is one mystery. Scripture unfolds it in interlocking components, each accomplished through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Ephesians can be called the book of the mystery. Three of the seven sit there.

- 1 Timothy 3:16, the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh. He was born that He might die.
- Ephesians 1:9–10 and Colossians 1:20: through Christ and the cross He gathers all things in heaven and on earth into one. Heaven on earth. He reconciled all things through the blood of His cross.
- Ephesians 2:14–16 and 3:6–9: He tore down the dividing wall and made peace between Jew and Gentile. The fellowship of the mystery is one people. The hardest racial hostility in history is ended at the cross. That is why the mystery is the only durable hope for the ending of racial hostility in the nations.
- Ephesians 5:32: the church as the bride, ruling and reigning in the resurrection in the embrace of God over His vast empire.
- Colossians 1:27: Christ in you, the hope of glory, the riches of that glory made known among the nations. He will not only dwell in Jerusalem. He will dwell in the nations.
- 1 Corinthians 15:51–52: we will not all sleep. The living will be changed in a twinkling. Mortality swallowed by immortality, bodies with the properties of His risen body.
- Romans 11:25–26: the salvation of Israel. God is not done with Abraham's children according to the flesh. When they embrace Messiah it will be life from the dead for the world.

Israel and the Mercy of God

Paul's desire is that we not be ignorant of this mystery: blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, and so all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:25–26). The discussion of Israel in Romans runs from chapter 1 through chapter 11. The mystery of Israel fueled Paul's Gentile mission. It was rooted in his understanding of the heart of God, not patriotism. He magnified his ministry among the Gentiles if by any means he might provoke to jealousy those who are his flesh and save some of them. If their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, their acceptance will be life from the dead (Romans 11:13–15). Understanding the mystery connects us with the full relevance of global missions. The Israel mandate is essential to the Great Commission that will result in the provocation of Israel. The Son of David will set His throne in Jerusalem. Israel will be raised in newness of life, and the result will be life from the dead for the whole world.

The partial hardening of Israel is not arbitrary. It is a judicial response to prolonged resistance, climaxed by the rejection of God in the flesh. It is also mercy. The hardening is partial and temporary, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. The fullness of the Gentiles is the Gentiles fully and faithfully living and preaching the gospel. When that happens it will provoke the Jews to jealousy, and so all Israel will be saved. Concerning the gospel they are enemies for our sake. Concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 11:28–29). God has committed them all to disobedience that He might have mercy on all.

Four mountaintops in Romans must be held together. First, Jesus is the Son of David, declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection (Romans 1:3–4). Second, through the new birth we share that same resurrection power (Romans 6). Third, all Israel will be saved and brought into the power of the resurrection (Romans 11:26). Fourth, when Israel is brought into that realm the whole world will be thrust into a new dimension, life from the dead (Romans 11:15). The environment will shift, society will shift, and creation itself, subjected to futility, will be delivered into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Romans 8).

Romans 9 becomes clearer when Israel remains the consistent subject. Paul is explaining God's dealings with a people to whom everything was given, who have largely resisted the gospel, and for whom God still has an irrevocable purpose. Three movements dominate the chapter. First, God's free, merciful election of Israel (vv. 6–13). The sequence through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob communicates one point: the purpose of God is not of works but of Him who

elects. Second, God's patience with Israel while she resists her calling (vv. 14–22). Paul uses the potter and the clay from Jeremiah 18. The potter does not discard the clay when the vessel is marred. He reshapes the same material. God is not, and never will be, finished with Israel. Third, God's eternal plan for a vessel of mercy made of both Jew and Gentile (vv. 23–33). What Paul calls the vessel of mercy in Romans 9 is the one new man in Ephesians 2–3.

Being God's Inheritance

One of the most staggering realities of the mystery is that the redeemed are themselves God's inheritance. The Father promised the Son an inheritance, and the Son obtained an inheritance for the Father. It is amazing that the God who possesses all things has an inheritance for which He must wait. Jesus' inheritance is a people who are in loving obedience to the Godhead.

We are what God wants most and what God is most committed to. The Father and the Son want humanity redeemed and brought into deep fellowship with Him. This is the great prize of all the ages that the Father has chosen to give the Son, a church filled with loving obedience. That identity is the foundation of our value and dignity. It changes why we do what we do. We are predestined to sonship, accepted in the Beloved, and called to be holy and without blame before Him in love. Holiness, in essence, is love for God and for one another. These realities are pursued in time and attained in eternity.

The plan would cost God everything and it would require humans to respond in faith and love by the grace the Father and His Son provide. Many of the most prized of God's creation will refuse His grace. The Second Person of the Trinity had to enter the realm of the natural, be exposed to the full plight of humanity, and face real temptation in order to purchase our salvation. The plan is carefully thought through, and its wisdom is manifold (Ephesians 1:8–10; 3:10).

Father, thank You that what was hidden is now made plain. Let the cross be our wisdom. Keep us from being ignorant of this mystery. Fill the earth with the knowledge of Your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions

Part Two

1. What does God promise Abraham in Genesis 12, and what does the Davidic covenant add?
2. How must the seed be held in tension: Christ, ethnic Israel, and Gentiles in Christ?
3. What dilemma does the Holy of Holies create for the promise that the earth will be filled with glory?
4. Why does Daniel 2 matter for understanding the mystery?
5. What does Paul mean by the mystery, and why is the cross the sum of it?
6. What did “It is finished” secure beyond personal forgiveness?
7. Name the seven components of the mystery and the passage for each.
8. How do partial hardening, the fullness of the Gentiles, and life from the dead fit together in Romans 11?
9. Where have you started the story in the New Testament without Genesis, and what did you miss?
10. What changes if you live as part of the inheritance the Father gives the Son?

Part Three

Living Inside the Mystery

> *I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice. (Romans 12:1)*

The Therefore of Romans 12

Romans 1–11 gives us the beauty of God and His leadership so that in chapters 12–16 we know how to respond. The same pattern appears in Ephesians: chapters 1–3 declare the glory of God's kingdom; chapters 4–6 show us how to live in light of that glory. If all we do is preach the lifestyle of Romans 12–16 or Ephesians 4–6 without calling people to the beauty and glory of God found in Romans 1–11 and Ephesians 1–3, we are guilty of moralism. We are calling for behavior modification without the transforming vision of who God is and what He is doing.

> *But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. (1 Corinthians 2:10–12)*

Jesus did not tell Nicodemus to change his behavior in order to enter the kingdom. He said, You must be born again. The subject of the mystery, when understood and proclaimed with living understanding, produces concrete responses in ordinary life. Paul does not stop after the doxology of Romans 11:33–36. He continues: I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:1–2). The therefore is anchored in the mercies of God revealed in the mystery of Israel.

The transformation Paul calls for is a metamorphosis, as radical as a cocoon becoming a butterfly. It is a disruptive process, and it is visible. Do not be conformed to this world. Be transformed by the renewing of the mind. Adjust your thinking according to the pattern of the mystery. The moment you touch the mystery it will be disruptive to you personally, and it will be disruptive through the things that come out of your mouth. Being a messenger is not primarily about turning over tables. It is about eating the scroll and getting our hearts and minds aligned to the mystery.

Preparation for the end of the age is not primarily the knowledge of timelines. Revelation 19 says the bride has made herself ready with linen clean and bright, the righteous acts of the saints. Those righteous acts are empowered, fueled, and envisioned by the proclamation of the gospel and the mystery of God. The

knowledge of the end times is important because there is a knowledge of Him to be found in it, but the knowledge itself is not the preparation. The preparation is a life transformed into the likeness of Christ in all our ways.

Stewardship and Worldview

Paul speaks of having received a stewardship of the mystery. That entrustment includes intercession for the church to gain insight, proclamation of the gospel according to the mystery, willingness to suffer for it, and deliberately keeping the door wide open so that all the saints have access. The mystery was kept secret and has now been revealed to all the saints. There is no secret knowledge reserved for a special few. The door to the heart of God is wide open.

A moral worldview is important. It is rooted in ethics. A gospel worldview connects us with God's leadership and with what He is actually up to in history. It affects the way we interpret events in our personal lives, in the nation, and in the earth. Without those lenses we easily fall into either sentimentalism about Israel or self-justifying defensiveness. With those lenses we see that the subject of Israel is ultimately about the depths of the riches of God's wisdom, judgment, knowledge, and mercy.

Growing in the mystery requires a change in spiritual diet. We must learn to digest entire chapters rather than isolated favorite verses, and to approach familiar passages as if we have never read them before. The temptation is always to say, I already know what this is about. The better posture is to say, I do not yet know what this passage is saying, and then ask the Spirit to open it. At the Passover the Israelites were commanded to eat the entire lamb. When we feed on the Word we are not permitted to eat only the parts we prefer. Passages such as Isaiah 6 and Romans 9 must be taken whole if we are to hold the tensions of Scripture honestly.

The apostles consistently used eschatological truth to address ordinary pastoral issues. They called the church to live out marriages, parenting, employment, community life, and engagement with the surrounding culture in light of the coming kingdom and the return of the King. Eschatology is not an optional advanced topic. It is the framework that gives weight and direction to everyday obedience. The pattern began with John the Baptist and Jesus, Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand, and continued through the epistles. The consummation of all things is meant to engage the heart so that the gospel can be fully lived.

Zion and the Pathway of Insight

Isaiah 2:2–3 declares that in the latter days the mountain of the Lord's house will be established as the highest of the mountains, and all nations will stream to it. Psalm 48 describes Mount Zion as the joy of the whole earth, the city of the great King, whose beauty causes kings to marvel and tremble. The glory that will rest on Zion is not merely local. It is magnetic. The nations will be drawn by the light of justice and the presence of God. What the Lord does for Zion He does with worldwide significance. The particular work of saving and restoring Israel becomes the means by which the world itself is saved and restored.

Paul's great prayer in Ephesians 1:17–19 is the appointed pathway into insight concerning the mystery. He asks that the Father of glory would give the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, that the eyes of the heart would be enlightened, so that the church might know three things. The hope of His calling: the vision and final destination of the redeemed. The riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints: the value of the saints to God, the great prize given to the Son. The exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe: the same power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him far above every power.

These three components are Trinitarian. The Father is the architect and overseer of the plan. The Son is the initiator and administrator. The Holy Spirit is the executor. The things of God are spiritually discerned. It takes God to reveal God to the human heart. True apostolic ministry brings people into a depth of understanding of the splendor and majesty of Christ Jesus. The knowledge of God that Paul contends for is more than introductory. It is the deeper, intimate knowledge that produces loving communion.

The plan of God concerning Israel helps shape our worldview, our ministry philosophy, our intercession, and our relationship with Jesus. Paul's burden for Israel was fueled by his experience of the love of God in Christ. Immediately after declaring that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus, he turns to the sorrow and continual grief he carries for his kinsmen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1–3). The place where the burden for Israel is activated is the place of communion with the Lord.

History does not make sense outside an eternal perspective of God's plan for the world. There are many things about God's purpose for Israel that do not make sense outside the understanding that our final destiny is to be in His embrace as His glory fills the nations of the earth. The mystery is God's mercy strategy of how He is going to lead the nations into that fullness. Distinction remains even while standing before God is the same. A Jew does not cease to

be a Jew when he comes to Christ any more than a woman ceases to be a woman. Paul addresses our equal standing in salvation, not the erasure of every distinction God Himself established.

Father, thank You for the mystery of the gospel, the mercy strategy You held in Your heart from before the foundation of the world and have now made known through Your Son. Increase in us the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we may know You, trust Your leadership over Israel and the nations, and walk in the joy and obedience that come from seeing Your purpose. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Discussion Questions

Part Three

1. What is the danger of preaching only Romans 12–16 without Romans 1–11?
2. What does Paul include in a stewardship of the mystery?
3. Why can Paul say “therefore by the mercies of God” right after Romans 11?
4. What is the difference between a moral worldview and a gospel worldview?
5. What three things does Paul pray the church would know in Ephesians 1:17–19?
6. Why is preparation for the end of the age not first the knowledge of timelines?
7. What does it mean to eat the whole scroll when you read Isaiah 6 or Romans 9?
8. Where will you apply the therefore of Romans 12 this week?
9. How did the apostles use the coming kingdom to address ordinary life?
10. How does communion with Jesus become the place where a burden for Israel is awakened?

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The mystery is the cross.
The promise is the earth filled
with the knowledge of His glory.

God reigns.
The nations will be blessed.
What was hidden is now made plain
through the blood of His cross.