

Lesson 24

The Dispensation of Grace--Part 2

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.

Some churches are considered to be *dispensational* in their teaching. Many Christians do not realize that the word "dispensation" 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!

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).

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

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

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).

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." 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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