

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON THIRTY-TWO)

“GOD’S UNIVERSITY FOR ANGELS”

EPHESIANS 3:1-11

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

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

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

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

5 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;

6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

7 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.

8 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;

9 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:

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

11 According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This week, we are continuing our examination of **Ephesians** chapter **3**. In our previous **Lesson**, we observed that the Apostle Paul is a model of how to deal with doctrinal truths. Consistently in his letters, we find him breaking forth into prayer and praise after expounding on one of the Doctrines of grace. And this is exactly what he does in this instance. His exposition in chapter **2**, of God's grace exhibited in the salvation of sinners dead in trespasses and sins, and His uniting of both the Jews and the Gentiles in one body-the Church, leads him to offer a prayer for his readers. However, his prayer is interrupted shortly after it begins, as he digresses to speak about the "*mystery of Christ,*" and to give a description of his ministry from verses **1** through **13**. He resumes his prayer in verse **14**, and concludes in verse **21**.

In verse **6**, Paul reveals to his readers what this "*mystery of Christ*" is. The mystery of Christ is, that in His death on the Cross, He not only purchased eternal life for those who trust Him, but He also purchased and formed a new people, a Church composed of both Jews and Gentiles who are heirs of God's promises and beneficiaries of God's grace. The mystery had not been made known to persons in previous generations, but God had revealed it to the Apostles and Prophets of the New Testament era.

God gave Paul a "*dispensation,*" a special responsibility of administering the grace of God to the Body of Christ in general, and to the Gentiles in particular. In communicating the mystery of Christ to the

Gentiles, Paul put it in terms of the unsearchable riches of God's grace. The essence of the mystery which he proclaims to us Gentiles is that since Christ is the one through whom we become heirs of all the promises made to God's people, therefore, there are unsearchable riches in Christ. The secret that has been revealed is that we Gentiles can have all these riches through faith in Christ.

In **verse 9**, he states why the dispensation of the grace of God was given to him. He says, *“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.”*

Having been given the awesome responsibility of administering the grace of God to the Body of Christ, and particularly to the Gentiles, Paul had a passionate desire to make this revelation known to all people and to have them share in the fellowship of this mystery.

We said last week, that it was our conviction that it is the responsibility of every member of the Body of Christ, not only to recognize the fact that every believer is united with every other believer in Jesus Christ, without any separation such as existed between the Jews and the Gentiles, but to demonstrate the reality of this unity by how we treat each other.

We noted that in **John 13:34-35**, our Lord said to His disciples, *“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*

We are commanded by our Lord to love each other with the same patient, tender, consistent love that He has exhibited toward us. The authenticating sign of genuine discipleship is love. What supremely identifies a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ is love, love for his or her fellow believers.

Brothers and sisters, let me state very clearly, that as far as Jesus Christ is concerned, if we are not loving our fellow believers as He has loved us, we are lacking the evidence of our authenticity as His disciples, no matter what other proofs of discipleship we may claim to possess. I hope that we will acknowledge the truth of this and give more credence to the Word of God than we give to our own distortions of truth.

At this point, someone may be wondering, “Why did God keep this ‘*mystery*’ about the church hidden for so many centuries?” It is true that the Old Testament clearly indicated that God would, one day, save the Gentiles through Israel, but it was not revealed that both the Jews and the Gentiles would form a new creation, the Church, the Body of Christ. It was this mystery that the Holy Spirit revealed to Paul and the other leaders in the early church, and that was so difficult for the Jews to accept.

In verse **10** and **11**, we learn that one of reasons for the ‘*mystery*’ about the church being kept a secret for so long is 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.*”

Paul tells us that “*the principalities and powers in heavenly places*” are also involved in this great secret. By “*the principalities and powers in heavenly places,*” Paul means the angelic beings, both good and evil, created by God. The word “*by*” is the translation of a Greek preposition which speaks of intermediate agency. It is by, or through, the agency of the Church that the angels are learning of the manifold wisdom of God. God is “educating” the angels by means of the church!

The angels were brought into existence, through the creative act of God before this universe was created. **Job 38:4-7**, clearly indicates that the angels were present when the universe was created and that they “*shouted for joy*” at the marvel and majesty of the original creation. In that passage, the LORD said to Job,

4 *“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you possess understanding.*

5 *Who set its measurements—if you know—or who stretched a measuring line across it?*

6 *On what were its bases set, or who laid its cornerstone—*

7 *when the morning stars sang in chorus, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?*

(New English Version)

The “*sons of God*” referred to in verse 7 are of course the angels.

The universe is very old, millions of years old in fact, as shown by the science of astronomy. The angels have been contemplating the marvel and the majesty, not only of what God has created, but of God Himself, all those millions of years, and yet there are some things about Him that they have not learned, which only the Church can teach them.

We must bear in mind that the angels are created beings and are not omniscient. They do not know everything. In fact, Peter indicates that during the Old Testament period, the angels were intensely curious about God’s plan of salvation then being worked out on the earth. In **1 Peter 1:8-12**, we read the following:

8 *You have not seen him, but you love him. You do not see him now but you believe in him, and so you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy,*

9 *because you are attaining the goal of your faith—the salvation of your souls.*

10 *Concerning this salvation, the prophets who predicted the grace that would come to you searched and investigated carefully.*

11 They probed into what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating when he testified beforehand about the sufferings appointed for Christ and his subsequent glory.

12 They were shown that they were serving not themselves but you, in regard to the things now announced to you through those who proclaimed the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—
things angels long to catch a glimpse of.

(New English Translation)

Peter says that the angels “*long to catch a glimpse of*” these things. The Greek word translated “*long*” is a strong one, referring to a passionate desire. The words “*to catch a glimpse of*” are the translation of a Greek word which means, “to stoop and look into.” Metaphorically it means, “to look carefully into, to inspect curiously.”

Brothers and sisters, the angels stoop in order to carefully look into the mysteries revealed through the intermediate agency of the Church. They are like the cherubim, bending over the Mercy Seat where man has access to God through a substitutionary sacrifice that cleanses him from sin. They are not participants in the work of salvation but they are spectators of it. Truth is being made known to the angels by means of the instrumentality of the Church. The angels are in God’s university and the Church is their lecturer.

The following passages of Scripture, all reflecting the rendering of the **New English Translation**, suggest that the angels watch the activities of believers with great interest:

Luke 15:10

“In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels over one sinner who repents.”

1 Corinthians 4:9

*“For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to die, because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to **angels** and to people.”*

1 Corinthians 11:8-10

8 For man did not come from woman, but woman from man.

9 Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for man.

*10 For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, **because of the angels.***

While the reference to the angels in these passages, may not always be entirely clear, they nevertheless reflect an awareness that angels are very interested in the operations of the Church.

What is it that the angels are learning from the church? Paul informs us that they are being enlightened as to *“the manifold wisdom of God.”* Without a doubt, the angels know a great deal about God. They know about His omnipotence and His omniscience; they know about His awesome holiness; they know about the swiftness and severity of His justice. Both the elect angels and the fallen angels know by experience a lot about God as the following passages of Scripture clearly indicate:

Isaiah 6:1-3

1 In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.

2 Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly.

3 And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

Isaiah 14:12-15

12 How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

13 For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:

14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.

15 Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.

Mark 1:23-26

23 And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out,

24 Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.

25 And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him.

26 And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him.

James 2:19

“Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.”

Jude 6

“And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.”

Brothers and sisters, it is the wisdom of God as seen in His new creation the church, which is new to the angels. Unsaved persons look at God's

plan of salvation and consider it either as an offense or as foolishness. But it is that very plan of salvation which demonstrates the wisdom of God. In **1 Corinthians 1:18-31**, the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, illustrates this point eloquently:

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will thwart the cleverness of the intelligent.”

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the expert in the Mosaic law? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made the wisdom of the world foolish?

21 For since in the wisdom of God the world by its wisdom did not know God, God was pleased to save those who believe by the foolishness of preaching.

22 For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom,

23 but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

24 But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

26 Think about the circumstances of your call, brothers and sisters. Not many were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were born to a privileged position.

27 But God chose what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose what the world thinks weak to shame the strong.

28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something,

29 so that no one can boast in his presence.

30 He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption,

*31 so that, as it is written, “**Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.**”*
(New English Translation)

As the angels carefully watch the outworking of God’s plan of salvation in the lives of the foolish things, the weak things, the low things, the despised things, and the things regarded as nothing; as they see how the great wood-carver is making something beautiful out of the lives of these defective and rejected pieces of lumber, they are learning about the love and the mercy and the grace of God.

Both the elect and the fallen angels are aware of how unworthy we are. They have seen how miserably we have failed, after we have been saved; they know how often we have done despite the Spirit of grace; they have watched as time after time, the Good Shepherd has left the ninety and nine in the wilderness and gone in search of us; they have stooped down to watch as He seeks until He has found us and lays us gently on His shoulders; they have heard Him cry out as He nears home “*Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost.*”

The first time they sinned, they were banished forever, but they watch as we are given a second chance, then a third chance. A million chances later they are amazed that there is no lessening of His love, His mercy and His grace!

They bend down their ears to hear the least of the saints as he or she sings,

*I am so glad that our Father in Heav'n
Tells of His love in the Book He has giv'n;
Wonderful things in the Bible I see,
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.*

*Though I forget Him and wander away,
Still He doth love me wherever I stray;
Back to His dear loving arms would I flee,
When I remember that Jesus loves me.*

*Oh, if there's only one song I can sing,
When in His beauty I see the great King,
This shall my song through eternity be,
"Oh, what a wonder that Jesus loves me!"*

*I am so glad that Jesus loves me,
Jesus loves me, Jesus loves me;
I am so glad that Jesus loves me,
Jesus loves even me.*

They watch and listen as a fumbling, stumbling saint kneels by his or her bedside and sings,

*Tho' a vessel I may be,
Broken and small, broken and small,
Yet His blessings fall on me,
Sweeter than all, sweeter than all.*

*When I reach the crystal sea,
Voices will call, voices will call,
But my Savior's voice will be
Sweeter than all, sweeter than all.*

*Jesus is now, and ever will be,
Sweeter than all the world to me,*

*Since I heard His loving call,
Sweeter than all, sweeter than all.*

How the angels watch the lives of the saints. How they wonder at creatures once totally depraved, now living holy lives that glorify God. It is in the Church that they see the revelation of God's love-sinners saved by grace, raised to a seat in the heavenly places in Christ. The Church is God's university for angels.

Brothers and sisters, as is always the case, with great privileges come great responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the Church to demonstrate the wisdom in God's mysterious plan to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We must always be conscious of this responsibility. We must bear in mind that the wisdom of a plan is seen by the fact that it works. We show the wisdom of God to the angels by demonstrating in the church that the plan is working.

The way we live our lives, and particularly the way that we treat each other, must testify to the angels that the death of Jesus Christ was not in vain: His death has indeed reconciled us to God; it has broken down the wall of hostility between the Jews and Gentiles; it has produced one new body, and it has given us the hope of God's never-ending, immeasurable kindness. We show the wisdom of God to the angels by living this way, by being the kind of Church that Jesus Christ died to create.

Brothers and sisters, we have both a wonderful privilege and an awesome responsibility. The truth that God is using the Church as a University for the angels is a summons to us to demonstrate to the principalities and powers in the heavenly realm that God's plan in sending his Son to die that we might have hope and be united in one body, the church, was an exceedingly wise one. Therefore, when we fail to live in love and unity with our fellow-believers, we are not only sending a negative message to unsaved men and women but we are sending a negative message to the angels.

In verse **9**, Paul stated that God hid this great plan “*from the beginning of the world,*” but now He wants “*the mystery*” to be known by His Church. This is an amazing privilege and responsibility. Now all believers are to be faithful stewards of this great truth! The making known of this great “mystery” both to human beings and to the angels, is now in our hands!

Brothers and sisters, in our previous **Lesson**, we stated that the authenticating sign of discipleship, as far as men and women are concerned, is love. What supremely identifies a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, to unbelievers is love-love for his or her fellow believers.

In this **Lesson**, we are being made aware that we have a further incentive for walking worthily of our calling, in all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, and being eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The new incentive is this: all the principalities and powers in the heavenly places are watching us as God uses us to teach them about the manifold wisdom of God. I pray that as they watch us, the members of **The Grace Workshop Ministries**, they will recognize beyond any shadow of doubt that God’s mysterious plan is indeed a wonderful and amazing one!