

**Ephesians 3: 8-11; “The Fellowship of the Mystery”, Message # 21 in a series
entitled – “The Exceeding Greatness of His Power”, A Bible Study
prepared by Pastor Paul Rendall on April 15th, 2020.**

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. He says that this knowledge was not made known in in other ages; that is during the time of the people who lived before the flood; or during the time of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; or during the time of the Old Testament dispensation from Moses to Christ, in the way that it had been now, to him. 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 is 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 this uncertain time of the coronavirus that we passing through now. These truths make up the fellowship of the mystery of Christ which all believers together have in Christ. So I want you to see, 1st of all – That there is a fellowship in our attitude that we have in understanding the mystery of Christ. 2nd – That there is a fellowship with all the saints in the mystery of Christ. And 3rd – That there is a fellowship in the mystery of Christ, which all the saints have with the angels. So let’s consider these good truths together.

1st – 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. It was living with this mindset which made them dogs and evil workers. They continually focused their attention on the flesh; that is, what a man was able to do by 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; 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 verse 7 – “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 think of himself in a self-righteous, self-confident way; that everything I think about myself and what I am doing is right because I have compared myself with the law, and I do not find anything against myself.

Before he was saved he could only think that he was doing many right and righteous things, when, if he only knew, he was actually falling far short of God’s glory. 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; 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, and 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.

Listen to what Paul says in 2nd Corinthians 10: 12-17. “For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves.” “But they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.” “We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the sphere which God appointed us – a sphere which especially includes you.” “For we are not overextending ourselves (as though our authority did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; not boasting of things beyond measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but having hope, that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you, and not to boast in another man’s accomplishment.” “But he who glories, let him glory in the Lord.” “For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.” Glorifying in the Lord is boasting in the Lord. And the opposite here, is commending yourself, or boasting in yourself or men; comparing yourself with others, and Paul says that this is not what a Christian should be doing if they are wise.

Paul did have a realistic view of himself and his own gifts. In 2nd Corinthians 11: 5 he says – “For I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles.” “Even though I am untrained in speech, yet I am not in knowledge.” “But we have been thoroughly manifested among you in all things.” “Did I commit sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted?” And so you see that this too high view of their own or other people’s gifts, abilities, and righteousness is a dangerous thing for a Christian to develop in their conscious experience. It is the Biblically correct understanding to have a humble view of yourself and not be boasting in others; not promoting a let’s compare ourselves with others, that is what Paul is inculcating here when he says that he is less than the least of the saints. God and Christ are glorified when we take this position in our thoughts.

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, how all comprehending these riches of Christ are. They include the riches of God’s goodness, His forbearance, and 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 2, verse 26, 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.” This is what God intends by His being so patient with our country and the many countries of the world that are presently experiencing the coronavirus. 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 because we do not turn to Him. Amos chapter 4, verse 10 – “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, and 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. The mystery of Christ is that even though you have repented once at the beginning, when you came to Christ, that you come to know that you need to keep on repenting of the sins of your heart and actions each and every day. This is what it means to 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)

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. 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 verse 9, were created through Jesus Christ. And all people and nations of people which God through Christ saves and brings into His kingdom, show forth the riches of God’s wisdom and mercy in every aspect of their salvation and 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 will continue it 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, he and his family being brought out of Sodom by angels before the city. 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 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 just the world in righteousness. A part of that judgment will consist in confessing before the angels those Christians who 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 this time of the coronavirus wisely, examining ourselves to see whether we be in the faith, confessing and repenting of our sins, and marveling over our fellowship in the mystery of Christ.