

Opening Words

What a contrast to teaching we hear today. We hear about how to be a better you and how to reach our full potential – and that can be OK – if we remember that God gives us grace and makes us better people not only for ourselves but also for others.

138 Eph Paul the Steward of God's Mysteries 1

Have I mentioned to you that my favorite movie is Ben Hur? I have seen it a dozen times, and I'm about ready to watch it again. I don't think there is another movie to match it for drama, adventure, romance, despair, and ultimately victory and peace. In this movie, there is an old servant of Judah Ben Hur who is given his freedom but through an improbable turn of events that threatened to break up the house of Hur, he refuses to take his freedom and remains within the household as a faithful steward of Judah's possessions until he returns.

What an attitude! What a servant's heart! The possessions were not his. They belonged to his master, but he faithfully watched over them, nurtured them, and had them ready as a good steward, or manager, for his master's use.

Paul has the same kind of attitude toward the grace that God gave him. Paul was a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles. From the viewpoint of the Romans he was a Roman prisoner, but from the viewpoint of the Gospel, he was a prisoner of the Lord.

But Paul was far more than this. He viewed himself as a steward, or to use the more modern term, manager. Let's listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 3. I'll start in verse 1 to give the context and read through verse 3.

For this reason, I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ² if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; ³ that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief.

Yes, Paul refers to himself as a steward. The Greek word he uses is the word from which we get our English word, economy. The Greek is oikonomia [you can hear the English, economy, in the Greek oikonomia]. Oikonomia is derived from two words – oikos which means house or household and nomos which means law. When you break it down into its simplest form, it is about the rules or laws by which a household operates. Good household leaders will set some rules and standards by which a house can run itself efficiently and in an orderly way.

This is the idea behind the word, steward. Although we don't use the word, steward, that much and have replaced it with the word manager, the idea is of someone who has received responsibility for the running of an organization or a household including overseeing the finances.

Paul received something. He tells us twice in the opening verses of Ephesians that God has given him grace. He says it here in verse 2 and he says it in verse 7 and the idea that Paul wants to get across is that he is a good steward of what God has given him. He is a good steward of the grace of

God. And one of the reasons he is a good steward is that he realizes that the grace given to him is not for him to enjoy exclusively for his benefit. The grace God has given Paul is for the sake of others. Paul puts it this way in verse 2; if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of the grace that was given to me for you!

What a contrast to teaching we hear today. We hear about how to be a better you and how to reach our full potential – and that can be OK – if we remember that God gives us grace and makes us better people not only for ourselves but also for others.

Well, Paul gets specific in verse 3 and he tells us what his stewardship was about. Paul tells us that God gave him a revelation. Paul tells us that God revealed a mystery to him. Three times in the space of a few verses Paul uses the word mystery; here in verse 3, in verse 4 and again in verse 9. This is an important concept for Paul and we need to explore it a bit.

In our modern age, when we hear the word mystery we think of things that are strange, dark, puzzling, baffling, and difficult to resolve. But in ancient times it had a different emphasis. In ancient times a mystery was information that was given to initiates of certain kinds of religions. People who were outside did not know the mysteries. People who were on the inside, those who had gone through the sacred rites and initiation ceremonies were privy to the truths of their religion. A mystery was not something they had to figure out or solve, but it was information that was divulged to them once they were part of the group.

In the Biblical record, mystery, had yet another idea to it. A mystery was divine truth that could only be known by a direct revelation of God. We think of the book of Daniel and the dream of Nebuchadnezzar that so troubled him. God revealed the dream and its interpretation to Daniel and when Daniel goes before the king he says, “There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries.”

Now there is one other important truth to realize about these divine mysteries. They all are about the fulfillment of God’s plan on earth. They are about the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth. God’s dream to Nebuchadnezzar was about the coming kingdoms in the Mediterranean world, the successive powers of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome which would all give way to the power of the kingdom of God.

And, I must digress here for a moment. I must express my disdain and even disgust with the many people who write books about the so-called hidden messages of the Bible and the hidden codes in the Bible. Let me tell you what I think about that. I think that it is wrong, misguided, and in some cases I fear it may be fraudulent. God does not have secret codes in the Bible that can only be cracked by computers. God did not provide computers to crack mysterious biblical messages. God gave apostles and prophets to whom he revealed his mystery. So, don’t fall for these teachings about secret messages in the Bible. Instead, listen closely to the historic teaching of the apostles and prophets.

Jesus spoke of the mystery of the kingdom. He told parables and said the parables revealed the mystery of the kingdom of God. Notice that the mystery is about the kingdom of God. It is not about hidden messages of who would be assassinated or who would rise to leadership in the Middle East in our day. That’s baloney! But the mystery is about the restoration of God’s reign on earth and so

when Jesus spoke in parables he was telling them that the kingdom was coming like a farmer sowing seed into soil, like a mustard seed, like a woman putting leaven in dough.

The reason the kingdom is a mystery is because of the sin of the world. God never intended his plan to be a mystery to so many people for so long but people rebelled against his plan for so long that they no longer had eyes to see and ears to hear the simple truths about God's plan for the world.

And now we come to Paul's use of mystery and he says that God gave him a revelation of the mystery that was unfolding in his generation. Let's read a little further in verses 4-5.

⁴ By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.

Paul makes a startling claim. He says in other times, in previous generations God did not reveal this mystery but he was revealing it in his time, in his generation and notice that he was revealing it to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit. Shall I say it again? There are no hidden codes in the Bible that require a computer program to decipher. This is not God's method. God's method is the Holy Spirit. God's method is apostles. God's method is prophets. And God revealed what we need to know in the generation of Christ and the apostles. So ... save your money and stay away from these unbiblical claims.

What was it that God revealed to Paul? Paul tells us the mystery in verse 6. Listen closely: "*to be specific*, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Does that sound familiar? That is what Paul talked about extensively in chapter 2! Paul is talking about the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in one body. The mystery is that Gentiles are fellow-heirs, fellow members in the Body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the proclamation of the gospel.

But why did Paul call this a mystery? And why did he say that this mystery was unknown in previous generations? We must remember something – the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied that the Gentiles would be saved! Remember the promises God made to Abraham – all of them climaxed in this phrase – "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed." God did not choose Abraham only to bless Israel. God chose Abraham to bless the world. God repeated these promises to Isaac and Jacob. When God formed their descendants into the nation and entered a covenant with them he told them their purpose was to be a kingdom of priests. They were to be priests to the world. When God entered a covenant with David it was so that one of his descendants would be the ruler of the world. And when the prophets preached, they spoke of a coming day when the nations would stream into Israel.

So, now, through the preaching of the Gospel, the nations were starting to stream in as prophesied, but with this difference – they were not coming in as second class citizens, they were not coming in as servants to the Jews, they were not coming in with the requirement to be circumcised and keep the Laws of Moses in every jot and tittle. They were coming in as Gentiles and as equal members of

the body with the Jews, as fellow heirs with Israel and as fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus. This was the first century breakthrough. This was the mystery that was revealed to Paul and to Peter and to other apostles and prophets. The Gentiles *as Gentiles* are equal with the Jews by the grace of God.

This is why many of the first century Jewish people hated Paul. They thought he was undermining their special status and their privileges and they tried to kill him. He had to appeal to Caesar for survival and he wound up in Rome as a prisoner for the sake of his message of grace to the Gentiles. And why was he a prisoner? He was a prisoner because he was a good steward of the mystery that God revealed to him and to the other first century leaders. There is a quite a challenge there for us, but we'll have to wait for our next lesson to explore that as we continue in Ephesians and learn the wonders of the spiritual world.