

The Sacred Secret: Sharers in the Spirit

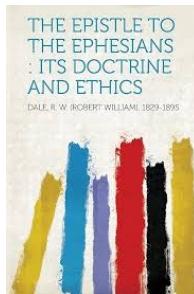
Study 5a: Is the MYSTERY ELITE KNOWLEDGE? (3:1-7)

3:1,2 Whose elitist, possessive pride put Paul in jail? (Acts 22:18-23)

What had led to his arrest in Jerusalem, his imprisonment there and in Caesarea, his successive trials and his subsequent appeal to Caesar which had brought him to Rome, was fanatical Jewish opposition to his mission to the Gentiles. [Stott 114]

Why is Paul's unique mission, "the stewardship of God's grace", so anger-inspiring? (see also vv. 7,8,13)

When he was first called to the apostleship he might naturally have thought that his true work was to preach the gospel to Jews. Was he not one of themselves, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, blameless in his observance of all their sacred laws? Had he not spent his youth in accumulating Jewish learning? Was he not perfectly familiar with all the intricacies of Jewish speculation? Was not the method of Jewish thought his own? The struggles through which he himself had passed on his way from the old Faith to the new, would they not enable him to enter into the very heart of his countrymen who would have to pass through similar struggles? All the most passionate forces of his nature made him long to bring his own people to Christ. But when it became clear that Christ meant him to preach the gospel to the heathen he frankly accepted the commission. At first it may have seemed to him the less noble task. But as years went on, his imagination as well as his heart became completely filled with the grandeur of his vocation. [Dale 231]



3:3-7 What is the "mystery [sacred secret, NWT] of Christ"? (1:9-10)

'Mystery' opposite of two-tier salvation

The Greek word *mysterion* ... referred to a truth into which someone had been initiated. Indeed it came to be used of the secret teachings of the heathen mystery religions, teachings which were restricted to initiates. But in Christianity there are no esoteric "mysteries" reserved for a spiritual **elite**. On the contrary, the Christian "mysteries" are truths which, although beyond human discovery, have been

revealed by God and so now belong openly to the **whole church**. More simply, *mysterion* is a truth hitherto hidden from human knowledge or understanding but now disclosed by the revelation of God ... Paul assembles (and in one case invents) three parallel, composite expressions. Each has the same prefix *syn*, "together with", and indicates what Gentile believers now have and are in partnership with Jewish believers. What is this? Gentiles are "co-heirs" (*synkleronoma*), "concorporate" (*syssoma*) and "co-sharers" (*symmetocha*) of the promise. But these three unusual Greek words need to be spelled out a little. What Paul is declaring is that Gentile and Jewish Christians together are now fellow heirs

and of the **same** blessing, fellow-members of the **same** promise. And this shared privilege is both *in Jesus Christ* (because it is enjoyed equally by all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, provided that they are in union with Christ) and *through the gospel* (because the **gospel** proclamation **includes this unity** and so makes it available to those who believe). [Stott 116-117, emphasis added]

Study 5b: The UNFATHOMABLE RICHES of CHRIST (3:8-13)

3:8-9 Why is Paul the ideal minister for preaching, "according to the gift of God's grace", the "unfathomable riches of Christ"? (Matt. 13:44-46; Phil. 3:1-11 -- who are the "dogs ... evil workers"?)

Perhaps he was deliberately playing on the meaning of his name. For his Roman surname "Paulus" is Latin for "little" or "small", and tradition says he was a little man. "I am little," he may be saying, "little by name, little in stature, and morally and spiritually littler than the littlest of all Christians." In affirming this he is neither indulging in hypocrisy nor grovelling in self-depreciation. He means it. [Stott 119]

What these riches are we may judge from Paul's exposition in Ephesians 1 and 2. They are riches freely available because of the cross. They include resurrection from the death of sin, victorious enthronement with Christ in the heavenlies, reconciliation with God, incorporation with Jewish believers in his new society, the end of hostility and the beginning of peace, access to the Father through Christ and by the Spirit, membership of his kingdom and household, being an integral part of his dwelling place among men, and all this only a foretaste of yet more riches to come, namely the riches of the glory of the inheritance which God will give to all his people on the last day. ... Translators and commentators compete with one another in their attempt to find a dynamic equivalent in English. The riches of Christ, they say, are "unsearchable", "inexplorable", "untraceable", "unfathomable", "inexhaustible", "illimitable", "inscrutable", and "incalculable". Perhaps GNB's "infinite" is the simplest, for what is certain about the wealth Christ has and gives is that we shall never come to an end of it. [Stott 120]

3:10-13 What is the hidden "eternal purpose" of God which is now to be "made know through the church"? (2:18; 1 Tim. 2:5-7 -- note the "purpose of this witness", v.7, NWT)

No adjective sufficient to describe "the riches of Christ"

What is this eternal purpose which is now being worked out in history and eternity? It concerns the church, the creating of a new and reconciled humanity in union with Jesus Christ. This is the "mystery", hidden for ages but now revealed. Is this our view of history? We have all studied history at school and may have found it (as I did) abominably dull. Perhaps we had to memorize lists of dates or of the kings and queens who ruled our country. But what is the point of history? Was Henry Ford right when in 1919, during his libel suit with the *Chicago Tribune*, he said, "History is bunk"? ... Christians affirm, in contrast to all other views, that history is "his story", God's story. [Stott 127]

Let us beware of despising Christ's church

The major lesson taught by this first half of Ephesians 3 is the biblical centrality of the church. Some people construct a Christianity which consists entirely of a personal relationship to Jesus Christ and has virtually nothing to do with the church. Others make a grudging concession to the need for church membership, but add that they have given up the ecclesiastical institution as hopeless. Now it is understandable, even inevitable, that we are critical of many of the church's inherited structures and traditions. Every church in every place at every time is in need of reform and renewal. But we need to beware lest we despise the church of God, and are blind to his work in history. We may safely say that God has not abandoned his church, however displeased with it he may be. He is still building and refining it. And if God has not abandoned it, how can we? [Stott 126]

Indwelling

Study 6: ORGANIZATION or INCORPORATION? (3:14-21)

3:14-16a Through the riches granted us in Christ (cf. vv.11,12), what else do we inherit? ("Father" and "name" (vv. 14,15) are, like "least" in v.8, a Greek pun that we miss in translation)

It will be instructive to bring together here the various references which St. Paul makes in this epistle to the fatherhood of God. In his opening salutation we find the words "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"; and similar words occur at the close of the epistle. His great doxology opens with the words, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ"; and this title is resolved and emphasised, as we have seen, in the form "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory". Presently he uses the name absolutely, in speaking of "our access to the Father"; and he follows it by the significant phrase, "of the household of God". Then we have our present description, which expands and interprets the title "the Father of glory"; and shortly afterwards we find the absoluteness and universality of the fatherhood yet further declared in the words, "one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all". Then, lastly, Christian duty is summed up in the obligation to "give thanks always for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to Him who is God and Father". [Robinson 83]

3:16b-17a From where do Christians get their needed strength and power? (cf. v.20; 4:23,24)

To drop metaphor, a life may be truly Christian and yet far from fully Christian; the man may have come really to, and have really cast anchor on Him, and have really confessed Him, and be really seeking to serve Him, yet be keeping back, perhaps quite unconsciously, whole regions of the life from Him. He may be living rather as His ally than as His vassal. He may be rather treating Him as an august Visitor in His servant's house than behaving as the loving bond servant in a house where Christ is always the Master at home. [Moule 137-138]



3:17b-19 Do we attain to the "fullness of God" by study, or by ANY external method? (1:23; Rom. 5:5; Phil. 1:6; 2:13)

... many of us are conscious that we have no firm hold of Christ. He comes to us with blessings which surpass all our hope and all our thought, but we let Him go. How it is we can hardly tell, but in a few days or weeks all our blessedness is over. The apostle suggests the explanation. Christ can "dwell" in our hearts only "through faith"; and faith, though in its beginning the cry of helpless weakness and the birth of despair, is in its maturer forms the expression of the noblest strength. It is the result of the concurrent action of all the higher forces of the spiritual life in their most intense energy. The reason, the will, and the conscience, memory and hope, love, reverence, awe, joy and gratitude, are all of them blended in a great and perfect faith. To raise the soul to this height and to keep it there, it is necessary that we should "be strengthened with power through [God's] Spirit in the inward man." [Dale 248]

3:20-21 Is the eternal purpose ultimately about our glory, or even Christ's? (1:3,12,14,17; 2:7; 3:14)

Is it not true that among Christians thus described, and in whose lives there is much to respect, there appears too often a strange contrast when they compare their inner creed and their deepest experience with St. Paul's account here of the "grace and peace" of -- not remarkable Christians, but -- Christians? Not in formula, no doubt, but practically, have we not allowed ourselves to be content with a life of the soul lived rather in the suburbs than in the sanctuary? [Moule 150]

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