

The Ephesians Mysteries: a Study in the Importance of Some Dispensational Distinctions

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Intro

Much dispensational truth rests on the mysteries in the New Testament. A dispensation is a rule of life by which God governs or directs the lives of some or all of mankind. The present dispensation is God's grace (Eph. 3:1). This rule of life is only for the believers who make up the Church, the body of Christ. This dispensation is not about how one comes to be in the body of Christ, or how one is saved initially. This dispensation is about how one lives who is in the body of Christ, how we are saved in present tense salvation, also referred to as growing.

The mysteries are truths planned by God in the past but never revealed to man or angels before either Jesus, Paul, or John spoke of them. Only these three mention mysteries: Christ in His parables of the kingdom, Paul in his letters, John in Revelation. Paul defines a mystery for us three times in the New Testament, saying, "kept secret for times in eternities", "which for ages has been hidden with God", "was hidden from ages and generations but now has been made plainly visible to His saints" (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26). We might say they were "new truths" at the time they were revealed. Because they are new, when Jesus mentions a mystery, it was not spoken by the Old Testament prophets, when Paul mentions a mystery, it was not spoken by Jesus during His earthly ministry, though we might find related truth. The Ephesian letter includes five of these mysteries. These five mysteries provide us a brief picture of the New Testament's emphasis on who we are and how God plans for us to live.

By understanding the intent of these mysteries and the background of Ephesians, we should be greatly impressed with the need to maintain the distinctions of "classic dispensationalism" as revealed through Paul and expounded by such teachers as C.I. Scofield, L.S. Chafer, and C.C. Ryrie. (This is not to say that every aspect what each taught is accurate, but generally, I find their teaching reflects Scriptures' teaching) I wish to examine Paul's intent for citing these mysteries in His letter to the Ephesians. I will review some of the Biblical background material and then consider the mysteries in their context.

Background to Ephesians

Have you ever made a blatant error? Have you ever done something that has caused problems for other believers? The job of righting the wrong is quite a task. It is even worse when the error may cause you to be branded a hypocrite. If a pastor were to speak at another Church and do or teach something contrary to what he had been presenting in his home church as Biblical truth, that would be wrong. If word came back to the assembly he pastored, it could devastate that ministry. Paul ran into just such a problem.

Paul met the rest of the believers in Ephesus during His third missionary journey (Acts 19:1). These were students of John the Baptist and had not yet heard of the work of the Holy Spirit (v.2). So Paul asks, "into what, therefore, were you, baptized [immersed]" (v.3). The day Christ made His final ascension to the right hand of the Father, He told His disciples that in a few days they would be baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). But these believers had been isolated from the activity of the New Testament believers and were still living on Old Testament ground. They didn't know about this sending of the Holy Spirit or of the baptism which the Spirit would begin at Pentecost they knew only the baptism of John (Acts 19:3). John's baptism was one of repentance (Matt. 3:11). John's was a baptism that symbolically

purified the people. It was a Jewish ritual cleansing. But to some, even John had announced that another would be coming who would baptize by the Spirit.

Since these believers didn't know that the Holy Spirit had been sent, Paul wanted to know what they were baptized into? When we immerse a person in water, that individual is giving testimony to the fact that the Holy Spirit has already united Him by spiritual baptism with Christ and His body. By water baptism, the believer identifies Himself with His crucified, risen, and seated position in Christ. He says, "Just as I am immersed into this water, so the Spirit has already put me into Christ." Paul's question was, if they hadn't been baptized to testify to this then into what were they baptized? With their response, Paul goes onto explain about Christ Jesus (Acts 19:4). That they believed what Paul told them about Christ, is implied in the word "hearing" and that they were baptized into the character [AV "name"] of the Lord Jesus (v. 5). They identified in testimony with the immersion that had placed them into Christ.

With this core group of twelve men (Acts 19:7) Paul moved to the synagogue where He reasoned with the men concerning the Kingdom of God (v.8). The Kingdom of God as distinguished from the kingdom of the Heavens is the realm of salvation (Matt. 19:24-25). So, Paul was teaching concerning salvation and as is evident that some believed the message (Acts 19:9, 18). Paul's time with these believers was about three years (Acts 20:31).

While still at Ephesus Paul determined in spirit to go to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21). The words "in spirit" have been variously understood. Some understand them to be the Holy Spirit and others Paul's own spirit. That Paul's human spirit is intended, appears to be the understanding of the interpreters of the A.V. and NASB, as they have translated spirit with a small 's'. Dr. Scofield remarked, "Probably the question never would have arisen (otherwise than of necessity in the minds of translators and revisers) except for the supposed necessity of vindicating Paul in taking his last journey to Jerusalem. Paul never claimed for himself either infallibility or impeccability." [*Scofield's Question Box*, pp. 92-93.] It seems Paul was so determined to go that the Holy Spirit was merely warning Him of what was going to happen in Jerusalem (20:23; 21:11). But at Tyre, the disciples clearly told him through the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem (21:4). Remember, Paul was a man and was fallible and this time he overruled the Spirit's direction for him. And, Paul embarked, but he first headed to the North to visit other Churches before sailing to Israel. Various authors, in developing a chronology of Paul's activities have spaced the time from Paul's departure from Ephesus to his arrival at Jerusalem anywhere from 5-6 months to 1-2 years. Due to his eagerness to get to Jerusalem, 5-6 months is more likely.

As Paul finally leaves for Jerusalem, he decided to sail past Ephesus. Some reason that this was to save time since it would have taken longer to sail into Ephesus. This is partially true but only due to Paul's attachment to Ephesus. Luke records the real reason - he didn't want to spend time in Asia (Acts 20:16). "He would have been detained not only in Ephesus but as Luke says in Asia, meaning the province with its many important congregations. The clamor for him to stay for a while, to go here and there, would have been too great." [Lenski: p. 831] In Ephesus were believers that Paul had spent nearly three years with. That was longer than any other group to whom Paul had ministered. It would have been very hard to stop in Ephesus and only stay one evening. So, Paul stopped in Miletus and sent for the Elders of Ephesus. This would have taken longer than to sail into Ephesus but it didn't put Paul in the position of being tempted to stay longer. From the context of chapters 20-21, we learn that God's will for Paul was to continue teaching and evangelizing in Asia Minor and Greece. Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Pentecost was a Jewish holy day that belonged to the activities of a past dispensation (Lev. 23:16). But Paul wanted to be there.

Works cited

Dr. C.I. Scofield's *Question Box*, The Bible Institute Colportage Association of Chicago, 1917. pp. 92-93.

R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1934) p. 831

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he was well-received of the brothers. He rehearsed the work of God during their past ministry and the church rejoiced in this (Acts 21:17-19). The situation changed quickly. The church's leadership confronted Paul with the number of Jewish believers who were zealous for the law (21:20). These had heard that Paul was teaching the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to forsake Moses (21:21). Is this what Paul taught?

These were not false charges. Gaebelein writes, "Now the rumors about Paul were indeed true. He had preached the Gospel as it had been given to him by the risen Christ. In that Gospel the law could not be recognized. He had taught the position of the believer in Christ and as such the believing Jew was free from the law." [Gaebelein:365] During the time frame of Acts 20, Paul likely wrote the letters to the Romans and the churches of Galatia. In the letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that we are not under law (Rom. 6:14,15). He explained that we are dead to and delivered from the Law (7:4, 6). Christ is also the end of the Law for righteousness to all who believe (10:4; cp 3:21-28). To the Galatian Churches, he wrote that he was dead to the law (Gal. 2:19); that the righteous walk by faith but the Law is not out of faith (3:11, 12), and that the Jews who were under the law were redeemed out from it (4:5). In addition to direct statements concerning the Law, Paul also wrote that in Christ there are no more Jews or Gentiles. We were all made one (3:28). Then the strongest statements, "For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision strengthens anything nor uncircumcision but faith operating through love" (5:6). Again in 6:15, "Neither is circumcision anything nor uncircumcision but a new creation." To a Jew, such statements (and this is just a sample), would have been tantamount to teaching them to leave Moses. Paul didn't have to say, "Leave Moses!" It was present in His teaching.

Of specific interest to these Jerusalem believers was Paul's teaching not to circumcise their children (Acts 21:21). True, we have no statement by Paul instructing people not to circumcise their kids. When Paul taught that circumcision was of no special value; that circumcision gave one no special position in the assembly, a Jew would hear Paul telling him, "Don't circumcise your kids!" They would think, *Why do something if there is no special purpose!* If you tell a believing Roman Catholic, that the Catholic Church has no special authority and can not help them be forgiven or grow, that Catholic believer would hear, "I should leave the Catholic Church!" (I've had people ask me if that was what I meant)

Rather than defend what he had been teaching, Paul submitted himself to the recommendation of the Church leaders. They asked him to take four men, who had a vow, purify himself with them, and to put up the money that was necessary for them to offer the final sacrifices (v.24). By doing this, they hoped Paul could demonstrate that he walked "carefully, keeping the Law." They wanted him to demonstrate that he did something which he did not teach. It is true that Paul said he lived as one under the Law to win one who was under the Law (1 Cor. 9:20). But that was to win an unsaved Jew to Christ. The issue in Jerusalem involved how believers live. The worst part of this was that there was to be a sacrifice offered for each one of them (Acts 21:26). The offerings of a Nazarite vow included a

he-lamb, ewe-lamb, a ram, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour, a wafer of unleavened bread, a meal-offering, and a drink offering (Num. 6:14-15). One of these, the ewe offering was a sin offering (Num. 6:14). But Christ had brought an end to all such sacrifices (Heb. 10:12,18, 26). Dr. Gaebelein commented, "And a strange sight it is to see the Apostle Paul back in the temple, going through these dead ceremonies, which had been ended by the death of the cross. A strange sight to see him, who disclaimed all earthly authority and taught deliverance from the law and a union with an unseen Christ, submitting once more to the elementary things, as he calls them in his Epistle to the Galatian," [Gaebelein: 366-367].¹ On the question of whether Paul was out of God's will in this matter, Charles Ryrie comments, "God alone knows the full answer to this, though it would seem that he may have gone too far in his desire to please men. Certainly he had had sufficient warnings not to go to Jerusalem."

What should Paul have done? He should have explained to these Jewish believers what he wrote to the Galatians and Romans. They needed to hear that the Law was done as a way of life. They needed to know that law-keeping would not allow them better access to God, which was a key benefit of obeying the Law. They needed to hear about being under grace so they could mature in this present household of God. Paul did not share this. Paul reinforced their thinking that it was OK to live by the Law, even to be zealous of the Law.

The Lord disciplined Paul through the following events (Acts 21:27ff). The remainder of Acts involves Paul's imprisonment and defense before the courts and rulers of Rome. God's purpose was not foiled. Paul still carried God's message before many (Acts 9:15; 23:11), even to kings, but rather than as a free man, he presented his gospel in chains. The earliest part of Paul's imprisonment involved two inactive and mostly quiet years in the maritime prison in Caesarea Philippi on the Mediterranean coast. Paul had a few discussions with political officials but largely he sat in prison, sitting on the bench (*anathema*). Paul was learning to align himself with God's will rather than with his heart's desire. By the time he boards the ship for Rome, it appears Paul is adjusting his attitude to do God's will.

What have Paul's actions in Jerusalem to do with the Ephesians? They were the church Paul wouldn't even stop to visit on his way to Jerusalem. They were the church with which he only called the elders for an evening visit. They were the church to which Paul had not hesitated to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). They were the church Paul warned with tears every night and day (Acts 20:30). But he wouldn't stay, wouldn't visit the whole church, would take time for them. He would only visit an evening. A considered a Jewish feast to be more important. The Ephesians were mainly Gentiles (Eph. 2:11). In the past, they had been alienated from the politics of Israel (Eph. 2:12). Now, Paul just alienated them again! This time it was not from Israel but himself.

During his brief visit with the Ephesians, Paul warned the elders of the Church to watch out for the flock, because fierce wolves would come into them (Acts 20:28-29). But problems would not come only from without. Some elders would move to draw believers after themselves and so divide the church (20:30). Though news traveled slowly then, the news of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem reached Ephesus. Hearing the news of Paul's actions in Jerusalem, we can only guess the reaction. It is very possible that some of the wolves came in because of this or that some elders decided to break away in response. I recognize this is only a guess, but I wonder how we would react in a similar situation.

¹ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York City, NY: Our Hope, 1912) pp 366-367. Even Dr. Charles Ryrie appears to concur, noting Paul in this circumstance as a "middle-of-the-road Jewish-Christian" *The Acts of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1961) p. 110.

Some Ephesians may have responded, “Look at what Paul wants us to do. Come, I’ll give it to you straight.” or “Paul was confused when he was here. I’ll clear up any confusion.” The wolves had an open door to these confused saints. This is partially conjecture, but something disrupted the relationship between the Ephesian believers. Something fostered a conflict between the believers along Gentile and Jewish lines. There is no hint of the conflict when Paul met with the elders. Therefore, the problem arose within four years so that word reached Paul who was then in chains in Rome. While they had heard God’s whole counsel, they needed to be reminded about God’s present dealing with the Church.

Just as Paul’s teachings about grace in place of the Law had disturbed the Jews, so Paul’s involvement in dead Jewish rituals could have disturbed believers in Ephesus. His actions would have been equivalent to saying, “Forget about the grace I taught you. We should be living under the Law.” Paul didn’t practice what he preached. His actions spoke louder than his words. In Antioch, he had risen from the table and charged Peter in front of everyone of pressing the Gentiles to live like Jews (cp Gal. 2:11-14). Paul’s actions may have similarly affected the Ephesians.

When Paul wrote Timothy at Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3), Timothy needed to confront a distinct problem with law teachers. This problem seemed so upsetting and dangerous that Paul tackles it at the beginning. He warns about those trying to engage in debates about myths and genealogies (1:4). We do not know what comprised these myths but the use of the word genealogies may be a hint. Most of the children of Israel had been scattered among the nations already. Today such groups as those claiming to be British Israelis claim heritage from the lost tribes of Israel. It appears that Gentile believers or some wolves trying to infiltrate the ranks, promoted such teaching in Ephesus. At that time it may have been possible to still trace one’s heritage back several generations. It would appear that some were trying to claim Jewish heritage by use of endless genealogies (cf. Rev. 3:9). Paul calls this “myths.” Such teaching only produced debates. Recently a man claimed to possess a first-century ossuary containing the bones of a man named James (Jacob), whose father was Joseph and brother named Jesus (Joshua). With this scant evidence, some made suggested implications regarding Jesus and His family. However, these were three of the most common names in first-century Judea, so it was not uncommon for a family to have all family members bearing all three names. I’ve known families in which all the daughters bore the same first name and answered to their middle names. I use this only to say that if 20 centuries after these events, people still try to find significance in family names, we should not be surprised that some tried to lay claim to Israeli heritage in the first centuries. Some early Christians and others claimed to be Jews erroneously thinking it gave them some benefit. There is no benefit to be a Jew or a Gentile today. As unbelievers, both are guilty and under sin. Once saved, that identity is gone in the eyes of God and both are counted to be part of the one new man in Christ. Those whom Timothy was to correct did not appreciate this truth.

Not only had some taught these truths but some had turned aside to these meaningless talks (1 Tim. 1:6). They desired to teach the law when they didn’t understand it. Most people today who attempt to put the believer under the law do not understand what they are teaching (1:7). They do not use the law lawfully (1:8). They try to put believers under the law for growth when the law was meant to point out sin not bring about maturity! Most teach the precept of the law without the full teaching of the law which involved the penalty and sacrifices. The law is a whole (Jas. 2:10; Gal. 3:12). It is not something that can be divided as one sees fit. The misapplication and teaching of the Law had become a problem in Ephesus!

How swiftly did these problems arise? Paul wrote Ephesians about four years after his arrest in Jerusalem. Many Christians have witnessed the agonizing swiftness with which a Christian labor can be undone. Many Churches have experienced the sorrow of a disaster brought on by wolves, desiring to drag members after them, to gain a following and some notoriety with little care for the flock. Such situations are worse when those who promote the error are trusted members and leaders of the flock. If we assume that news of Paul's arrest arrived in Ephesus as much as a year later and that it took another few months for the Ephesian problems to reach Paul's ears moving him to write this letter, the troubles in Ephesus may have developed in as little as two years. The problems gained strength through Paul's inconsistency.

As with most of Paul's letters, Ephesians is written not as a doctrinal exposition, but as an attempt to clear up doctrinal and practical problems. Paul taught them doctrine while he was with them. Now, Paul returns to that doctrine to clear up misunderstandings and errors that had crept in. Ephesians corrects an error that was compounded by Paul's actions in Jerusalem.

With this background in view, the Ephesian letter begins to open more clearly. Some of this background has been my conjecture. Much is divinely recorded for us in scripture. Yet one other New Testament letter aids us in understanding Ephesians. The unsigned letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews is intended to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. Dr. Gaebelein remarks,

“It seems to the writer that Paul's last visit to Jerusalem also explains this Epistle. As we learn from the book of Acts, Paul went up to Jerusalem against the repeated warnings given by the Spirit of God. His arrest was the result of having gone into the temple to purify himself with the four men who had a vow on them. This he was asked to do and to show that he walked orderly and kept the law. He did wrong in this. It is true he acted through zeal and love for his brethren; yet he also knew that a believer, be he Jew or Gentile, is dead to the law and that all ordinances of the law were fulfilled and ended. Yet the Jewish believers in Jerusalem still clung to the law, were zealous for the law, went to the temple and made use of the ordinances. When in Rome as prisoner the Spirit of God moved him to write this letter in which the greater glory and the better things of the new covenant are unfolded with solemn warnings not to be drawn back into Judaism. And at the close of the Epistle the final and important exhortation is given “Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp (Judaism), bearing His reproach” (13:13). May not this Epistle have been written in view of Paul's failure in Jerusalem, showing these Jewish-Christians the necessity of separating from the shadow things of the Old covenant?”²

Paul's purpose in the Hebrew letter was to tell Jewish Christians to stop living like Jews-zealous of the law and to start living like Christians, with better promises, better hope, better covenant, better high priest, and a better future. (Heb. 8:6; 7:19; 9:11; 11:40). In the Ephesian letter, Paul challenges New Testament believers to continue living like Christians. As New Testament Grace believers they have a new future, a new relationship to Christ, a new present, and a new status. Each new thing is related to a mystery which Paul uses to challenge them to live like Grace believers and not to turn to the Law.

² Gaebelein op cit p.1093

Before we look at the mysteries, it is necessary to define the word “mystery.” We don’t need to look outside the New Testament to mystery religions for a definition. Paul defines a mystery three times. He explains a mystery, “which in/to other generations was not made known to the sons of men as it has now revealed by His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Eph. 3:5). We have revelation that Old Testament people did not possess. God used His apostles and New Testament prophets to reveal this mystery. This is one way in which the apostles and prophets laid the foundation for the Church, the temple of God (Eph. 2:20).

Some Bible students have made much of the adverb *hōs* “as.” They suggest the word means it wasn’t revealed **as much as** as it is now. This would be like saying that people in the 1920’s did not drive cars **as** we do today. They drove cars, but many aspects of cars have changed. This is an acceptable use of ὅς. However, it can mean that it wasn’t as revealed at all! This would be like saying that first century Romans did not drive cars **as** we do today. Therefore, ὅς can be a comparison of none to some or none to all. This definition combines the clearer statements made by Paul in other passages. In Colossians 1:26, he states that a mystery was hidden and is only now [at Paul’s time] made plainly visible (cp 1 Cor. 2:7). He tells us that a mystery was not only hidden but was “kept silent” (Rom. 16:25,26). Because it was hidden and kept silent with God, it was not revealed.

Some students wish to define a mystery as something revealed more clearly than in the past. They reject the clearer God’s definition found in Colossians and Romans. They wish to maintain a continuity between the Old Testament and the New, or more properly between Israel and the Church. This continuity does not exist. They do not recognize the disjunction. A similar disjunction can be seen in God’s kind presence to people before Sinai and the strict rules His imposes for approaching Him under the Law. The book of Acts presents a disjunction, slowly revealed but definitely present. In Acts 2, God began some new things. I have a good friend who simply defines a mystery as a new truth for us. It was new when Jesus, Paul, or John revealed it. It is no longer new, as these mysteries were revealed nearly 2,000 years ago. They are however new when compared to God’s revelation in the Old Testament.

Some Bible students, including dispensationalists, have reduced the mysteries to one and designate it The Mystery or The Mystery of the Gospel. Rather, Paul states that he and Apollos were stewards of God’s mysteries (1 Cor. 4:1). In the context of exercising spiritual gifts, he speaks of knowing “all mysteries” (1 Cor. 13:2). God did not reveal one new truth. He did not reveal one key truth with a series of sub-points. He revealed several new truths. Even Jesus revealed mysteries about the kingdom from the heavens and the kingdom of God. Jesus revealed truths about those kingdoms that one could not have discovered, no matter how diligently they searched the Old Testament Scriptures. In a similar way, no matter how much one may search the Old Testament, they will not find the mysteries God revealed through the apostle Paul.

The mysteries about the kingdoms were similar. Jesus spoke in parables so that those who see and heard might not go on seeing and hearing (Mt. 13:13). He spoke in fulfillment of God’s charge to Isaiah that the people would not see, hear, or understand what God was saying (Mt. 13:14-15). They refused God’s plain revelation, so He judged them to not understand His further revelation. However, Jesus’ disciples were to understand the mysteries (Mt. 13:11), so privately, Jesus explained some of these parables to them. The mystery of the four soils revealed to His disciples that they would encounter four responses to the message about the kingdom. This was new because Isaiah prophesied that “that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9). That will be true, but in the intervening time, some will not know and some will know but will become distracted and

dissuaded from following Jesus. So, some would never understand it and Satan would remove from their heart the word they heard (Mt. 13:19). Others would hear and understand. They would receive the message with joy but when others would make their lives hard, they would fall away (Mt. 13:20-21). Still others would hear the word and begin, but the enticements of the world and wealth would keep them from becoming fruitful (Mt. 13:22). Finally, some would hear the word, mature, and bear fruit (Mt. 13:23). Only one of these four are unbelievers. Two are believers that make very little progress. Only one of these four progress to maturity and fruit-bearing. This was new truth that would help those disciples understand that while some would respond positively, eventually they would disappear and we would wonder, "What happened to them?" Jesus explained this with this mystery parable. It is interesting that because of theological conclusions, some Bible students think that only the last group are true believers. They have concluded that all true believers will bear fruit, a conclusion drawn from misappropriated texts (e.g. Mt. 7:20).

As the disciples would benefit from knowing this mystery about the kingdom, so believers today benefit from knowing the mysteries revealed both by Jesus and Paul. We too benefit from understanding the responses the message about the kingdom. We also benefit from understanding what God is doing today and knowing that it is different from what He had done with Israel for nearly 1,500 years. Paul states that speaks a kind of mystery that expresses something about God's wisdom (1 Cor. 2:7, 1). He spoke that mystery truth among those who are maturing and for their maturity (2:6-7). That means a believer must respond in practice to the first truths. If Paul's letters are any help in this matter, the first truths explain who God says the believer is or believers are in Christ and how that does not change. Paul also explained a proper response to that reality in Christ; to count that true of ourselves as God counts it true (cp. Col. 3:1-3; Rom. 6:10-11). When a believer learns to set their mind to these truths, so that they view life and actions from that perspective, they begin to mature. For these believers, the mysteries bring more details and depth to the individual's view of God, and a basis for continued growth.

God revealed a series of new truths through Paul; truths that He calls mysteries. Below is a list of those mentioned outside the letter of Ephesians.

Romans 11:25 reveals that Israel is presently experiencing only a partial hardening and one that is not permanent. When God has completed His present work with the Church, He will resume His more focused work with Israel.

Romans 16:25 connects a mystery from God that God uses to stabilize believers. It reveals that what God counts to be true of believers in Christ does not change. This truth relates to understanding who Christ is today for the believer.

1 Corinthians 15:51 reveals that all believers will not die before our Lord comes for us, but we will all be changed. It adds another level of anticipation.

Colossians 1:25-26 reveals that the present administration or house rule was a mystery, meaning it is a different way of life compared to the Old Testament and the law specifically. Paul mentions this mystery in Ephesians.

Colossians 2:2 explains a relationship between God the Father and the Christ. In the first part of the verse, Paul states that this mystery encourages even greater unity between believers. This text is harder because it involves a rather extensive textual problem. Modern translations reflect the shortest reading "God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself." This is not a mystery. A

longer reading that accounts for the many variations in this problem reads, “the mystery of the God even Father and the Christ.”

Colossians 4:3 mentions the mystery of the Christ. It does not explain the mystery in that sentence. Paul explains it in chapter three and in Ephesians.

2 Thessalonians 2:7 reveals that this mystery of lawlessness has already been working, which means that Satan has always had a leader ready to step on stage whenever God’s restrainer (the Holy Spirit) leaves.

1 Timothy 3:9 states that a deacon must hold the mystery of the faith in a good conscience. The Faith is the collection of promises from God that constitute our Christian life. Because deacons oversee the distribution of the church’s material resources to believers in needs, they need to exercise faith in God’s promises for the local church.

1 Timothy 3:16 speaks of the mystery of godliness. Godliness is activity that honors God. Jesus Christ was the first person to live His life in such a way that He always honored God. He demonstrated that living in a human nature does not prevent one from honoring God in this way. Many Christians do not understand this mystery because they assume the believers in the Old Testament had eternal life and the same relationship to the Holy Spirit that we do. Jesus was the first human being to possess eternal life while He lived. Old Testament believers were promised that they would be resurrected to eternal life (cp Dan. 12:2). Both these relationships are game changers.

Each of these mysteries add a depth to our Christian life. They do this by revealing new relationships that God sustains to us today. In the next post, I will begin looking at the mysteries in Ephesians.

The Mystery of God’s Will

With his goal of uniting the Ephesians believers, Paul quickly reminds the Ephesians that God chose in Christ them before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4). He bound (predestined) them to be sons (1:5). The term son emphasizes a position of maturity and privilege. Part of God’s plan for us is that we should be placed as mature, privileged ones. Paul describes some of the activities God designed to bring us into conformity with our position as sons: He graced us in the Beloved (Christ), redeemed, and forgave us (1:6, 7). God promotes our maturity by revealing some of what lies ahead. Paul gives an important goal in the mystery of God’s will.

This mystery involves the desirous will [θέλημα] of God. God determined because He desired the truth of this mystery to be so. It is not a mystery that is being carried out in the present time but is relevant to we believers who were Gentiles. It speaks of our future, that is, the future of the body of Christ. Because it is a mystery, we know that while God desired this, He had not previously revealed it.

Old Testament prophecy gave clear statements as to the status of Gentiles during the Kingdom. Gentiles would not be assimilated into the people of Israel. God will continue to identify Israel as Israel even in the new creation (Isa. 66:22) “For just as the new heavens and new earth which I will make will endure before Me,” declares the Lord, “So your seed and your name will endure.” If plain language means anything, Jews are going to remain Jews and their name will also remain. Yet in this same passage, God says that the time is coming to gather all nations and tongues to see God’s glory (66:18). He will send the fugitives from His people Israel to the nations to declare His glory (66:19). Then verse 20, a theme found in several prophetic sections, declares that the Gentiles would bring the Jews [your brethren] from among the

nations. God will take some of the Gentile believers as priests and Levites (66:21). He does not make them Israelis but takes “from them” [מֵהֶם] “for” [לְ] priest and Levites. While they serve in those roles, they remain Gentiles. God will use the Gentiles to carry the sons and daughters of the Israelites (49:22). The Kings and princes of the Gentiles will be servants of Israel and will “bow down to you with, their faces to the earth and lick the dust from your feet” (49:23). These are not unsaved Gentiles who serve the Jews at this point. The only Gentiles who enter the kingdom are those who have done righteously to Christ’s brothers [the Jews] during the preceding tribulation (Matt. 25:32-40).³

That the Gentiles will slave for Israel is taught as a hope to the Jews in many other passages. The Gentiles will rebuild Israel’s walls and cities (Isa. 60:10). Israel would feed off the wealth of the nations (Isa. 60:11; 61:6). The Gentiles will come to the Jews for teaching (Isa. 60:3,4) as well as access to God (Zech. 8:21-23). And the Jews will have God’s promised completion of the Law by their becoming the head of the nations, not the tail (Deut. 28:1, 12-13). The plan God revealed to Israel by their prophets distinguishes between the Jews and Gentiles, not only during the Kingdom but also into Eternity (Isa. 66:22).

This is not the future expectation of the Gentiles in the Church. If the Ephesian believers wanted to go back to Israel’s Law; if they wished to turn to Israel’s Kingdom truth, they would be confronted by a different future from God’s plan for them. In that future, Gentiles would be servants to the Jews. Paul reveals a mystery about God’s will that involves a distinct future for the body of Christ. As will be seen in other mysteries, the believers who had come from the Gentiles stood on equal ground with those who had been Jews. Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ share the same future. That future is the content of this mystery.

This mystery reveals that God will head up all things by the Christ. This truth is presented throughout Israel’s prophets! The consummation of God’s purpose on this present earth was known as the Day of the Lord (Joel 2:2). It was seen as the time in which the Lord would have the upper hand, that He would be the judge. When Christ comes, He will pour out the Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28-29). God promised to set His King on His holy hill (Ps. 2:6). He told His Son to ask for the nations as an inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth as a possession (Ps. 2:8). Christ would break the nations with a rod of iron and dash them to pieces (Ps. 2:9).

Following Christ’s judgment of the world in that day of the Lord (Joel 3:14-16), He would make the earth beautiful and restore it to its productive pre-fall condition. All this happens as Christ’s kingdom begins (Joel 3:18-21). In that Day of the Lord, Israel will inhabit the land God gave to their Fathers (Ezk. 36:37-38; 37:25-26). The coming of His kingdom will bring physical blessings for Israel on earth (Isa. 60:18-22). Isaiah 11:1-10 describes many of those changes in the government and nature itself.

“And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse and a Branch shall grow out of his roots; and the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the Lord; and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears, but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath

³ This judgement by works is valid, for during the extreme persecution of the Tribulation, only genuine believers will do any good works!

of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his waist. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together. And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge from the Lord, as water cover the sea. And in that day there shall be a root of Jesse, who shall stand for an ensign of the peoples; to him shall the nations seek, and his rest shall be glorious."

With great emphasis, Christ's coming kingdom will not only bring righteousness and fairness but an entire change in the environment, that animal kingdom and the heart of man.

The works of Christ will also encompass the nations. The center of God's government [mountain] will be established on top of all other governments [mountains]. All the nations [gentiles] will stream to God's government (Isa. 2:2). They will come to learn. They will live their lives in God's plan [paths]. He will be their judge to determine matters between people. As part of these changes, they will no longer learn war (Isa. 2:3-4).

So how is Christ heading up all things a mystery? The clue is in the title, the Christ. Most of the time, when the Greek definite article is used, it is not translated in our English versions, because it makes for awkward English. Several times, however, the definite article brings specificity to a noun, a significance determined by context. While the definite article occurs many times with the title Christ, it normally points out only **the** Anointed One God has promised. However, in about a dozen instances, **the Christ** points to further relationship. The clearest occurrence of this usage is in 1 Corinthians 12:12 "For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also - the Christ." If I substituted the word "Church" for Christ, or "body of Christ" for Christ, most would read that verse with little thought or reaction. It seems to make sense. But Paul wrote "the Christ." The comparison is between a human body that is made up of many parts and believers united together with all the members having different functions. Why use the title "the Christ" instead of "the body of Christ" as in 12:27? "The Christ" expresses the intimate relationship that Christ maintains to His body. He extends or shares His identity with those united in Him: they as His body and He as the Head (Eph. 4:15). Christ as the head directs all the various members in service. He was made alive, rose, and sits at the Father's right hand. He extends that identity to all who are in Him (Eph. 2:5-6). This special usage of the title Christ does not refer to the body, but Jesus Christ sharing His standing with us.

This extension of Christ's identity to His body is also found in Ephesians 3:4-5, where we read of "the mystery concerning the Christ." This mystery will be dealt with shortly but for now, it reveals the unity of believers in Christ where Jesus Christ the head. It is the mystery of oneness in the body! Chafer also writes, "The member in the body partakes of the merit and honor of the head, and the life and power of the head is imparted to the member. So perfect is this unity between the Head and the members of the body, that it probable that Christ will never be seen in glory apart from His body, and the body will never be seen apart from Him (Cf. Cor. 12:12). [Chafer, Grace:223] Robert Gromacki agrees, "The analogy is clear: 'so also is Christ' (12:12b). The equation of Christ with His mystical body, the church, can be seen here. Christ said to Saul who had devastated the church: 'Why persecutest thou me?' (Acts 9:4; cf. Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:18)." [Gromacki:154]. Paul also speaks of "the Christ" with this idea in

Ephesians 3:19 and 4:13. For more on this, see earlier posts on Who Is Christ? [<https://john1420blog.wordpress.com/2020/02/20/who-is-christ-part-6-the-christ/>]

This usage of “the Christ” helps us understand the mystery of God’s will for the final dispensation. God desires that all things will be headed up. As I sketched out briefly, the Old Testament prophets revealed that Christ would reign and bring all things under His authority. The Old Testament saint could see Christ the King heading up all things, but “They saw not the revelation of the ‘New Man’ (2:15) which bears collectively the name Christ (1 Cor. 12:12).” [Chafer, Ephesians:98]⁴ Therefore, in this mystery, Paul is revealing that Christ is sharing His rule with us. We will participate in His work of heading up all things.

Does this square with other New Testament revelation? Indeed it does. Paul wrote, “Since we endure, we shall co reign” (2 Timothy 2:12).⁵ While we read “if”, Paul is writing a series of first-class conditions. He assumes each of these is true of the believer at some point in our lives. D. Edmond Hiebert points out, “The ‘if’ does not imply any uncertainty or doubt but for purposes of presentation is regarded as fulfilled, as true;” [Hiebert: 62]. Christ also promised this future as He dictated the letters to the seven Churches. “And he that overcomes [cp 1 Jh. 5:4-5] and keeps [or guards] my works to the end [the finished work of Christ], to him will I give authority over the nations; and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers even as I have received of my Father.” (Rev. 2:26-27). The very authority and promise which the Father gave Christ, He shares with us. Again, Christ told the overcomer of the Church at Laodicea, “I will grant him to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and have set down with my Father in his throne.” (Rev. 3:21). While Christ was sitting on His Father’s throne at the time of this letter, He will sit on His throne one day (Matt. 25:31). Then He will give us the privilege of sitting there with Him and reigning with Him.

The work of the Messiah [Christ] to head up all things on the earth was revealed in the Old Testament. That Christ would unite a new people to Himself and form one new man was a mystery. That He will share with them His rule over the earth - even over Israel - was a mystery. It was through the apostle Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-9), that God revealed this new work for the future. It had always been God’s desire [will] but it had been hidden, i.e. a mystery. What would Israel have thought had they known that God was going to use a mixture of Jews and Gentiles in a new spiritual relationship to head up the all things as well as to rule over them? God had to wait to reveal this until Israel had been set aside and Christ’s assembly began.

If God wanted the Ephesian believers to live under the law, if He desired that they attempt to grow by law rather than by grace, they would have to forfeit their new future. But this is not God’s plan. It is a future that cannot be forfeited. If they considered what life under the law was truly like, they would have to recognize that God’s place for the Gentiles would be as servants to the Jews. By dividing the body of Christ along racial-religious lines: Jews and Gentiles, they were denying this mystery about their future reign with Christ. Instead, their future would be exactly that spoken of in the Old Testament prophecies. However, if they would consider their new relationship to Christ and the new union of believers, they could

⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1935) p.98.

⁵ The term “jointly-reign” is formed by the word “reign” with the important preposition *sun* $\sigma\upsilon\nu$ emphasizing unity. *sun* - meaning -to be with, in a more intimate manner than *meta* $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$ which has the idea of general association .

think clearly about their future as co-rulers with Christ! They could not only positionally be sons, but in practice, they could share the privilege of knowing what the future holds for them. And as privileged sons, they would view God's desire for the future as God does, and this would positively impact how they relate to one another in the present.

The Mystery Concerning the Christ

The next mystery that is detailed is found in chapter three. Two mysteries are found in this chapter. The first referred to but not explained is the mystery of the dispensation of Grace (3:2-3). Paul writes that their previous understanding of the dispensation of Grace, which they had from reading the first part of this letter (probably not a reference to another letter), would help them understand Paul's knowledge of the Christ (3:3-4). This mystery concerning the Christ has already been mentioned in different terms by Paul in chapter two although he did not call it a mystery there.

The word Christ (Gk *christos*) means an anointed individual. It is a translation of the Hebrew word "Messiah" also meaning anointed one. The word "Messiah", the verb "anoint", and the noun "anointed one" are only used of the Lord Jesus Christ in four Old Testament passages (Isaiah 61:1; Ps. 2:2; 1 Sam. 2:10; Dan. 9:25-26). Other texts describe Him as anointed by indicating that the Spirit is **on** Him (Isa. 11:1-10). He is specifically called the one anointed by Jehovah in 61:1, for the Spirit is upon Him. Jh. 7:26,27, 31, 41 all demonstrate that the Jews expected Christ and knew what the Old Testament said about Him. Israel knew their anointed coming king would be born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:4-6). They knew He would be the Son of David (Mk. 12:35-37). They anticipated that He would be a great teacher (Jh. 4:25). He would raise those genuine believers in the last day (Jh. 11:25-27). There was much that was understood concerning Christ, long before Paul wrote the Ephesians.

The key to this mystery is given in verse 6 of Ephesians 3. Here the mystery of the Christ is appositionally defined by the infinitive "to be."⁶ The mystery was that Gentiles should be joint-heirs⁷ and joint-bodied and joint-sharers with reference to the promise in Christ Jesus. Each of the words heir, body, and sharers has the Greek preposition *sūn* prefixed. So, for example, *sūn* is joined to *klēronomos* and we have *sūngklēronomos*. The preposition *sūn* communicates a very close togetherness. To be in Christ is to share an imputed, reckoned, or God-credited relationship with Christ. It also means we share it together as believers. God sees us seated in Christ in the heavenlies, having been jointly-crucified, jointly-buried, jointly-made alive, and jointly-raised (Gal. 2:20; Rom. 6:3,4; Eph. 2:5,6). Jewish believers were not the only ones that would have such a position. Neither did they have a more prominent or powerful share in that identity. Gentiles believers share equally in this relationship.

What has this to do with Christ? It is more involved than just a position but a real unity with Christ! As we saw in the last mystery, the Christ refers at times to Jesus Christ the head sharing His status and identity with His body of believers united as one! In Ephesians two, Paul calls this the "one new man" (2:15). Paul said that Christ took the Jew and the Gentile and made one new man in Himself. He didn't make new men but a new man - the Christ! Paul doesn't say that Christ took the Gentiles and added them to the man Israel but that He made a

⁶ H.E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, (New York: MacMillan,) p.295.

⁷ While the translation "joint-" may seem awkward English, I am attempting to bring out the emphasis of the unity communicated by the Greek preposition *sūn* [σὺν].

new man. The adjective “new” translates *kainos* that described something as new in kind. Therefore, Christ created a new kind of man. Christ didn’t add Gentiles to Israel. He didn’t incorporate us in a new Israel but He made a new man. This new man is called the Christ as it is only exists united to Jesus Christ. “This new creation does not make a Jew into a Gentile, nor a Gentiles into a Jew. Rather did our Lord “make in Himself of twain one new man” (2:15). Here is the true Church, an organism in which the believing Jew and Gentile are reconciled to God in ‘one body’.”⁸

Paul mentions this mystery again in Ephesians 5:32. Just as the union of a man and woman make them one flesh (5:31), so the Church united to her head, Christ (5:23) is seen as one with Him. The Church is made one flesh with Christ, which is why we are members of His body (5:30). Normally, when a man and woman marry, the bride takes the name of her husband. And so it is with Christ and His Church. The Church takes the name of her bridegroom as she is united to Him - therefore we have - the Christ! I might add, that since the relationship of the Church as the Bride was unrevealed, the Gospels are consistent by not mentioning the bride, especially in the parable of the marriage feast (cp Matt. 22:1ff; 25:1ff).

Gentiles were separated from the politics of Israel and of God’s promises to Israel. The Gentiles were far off and godless in the world (Eph. 2:12) but God has made us near by putting us into the body of Christ with new promises. We are made near by Christ’s blood (2:17). We are nearer than any Jew ever was, for we are seated in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus (2:6) and are made part of the one new man in Christ (2:15). We, Gentiles according to the flesh, are now joint-citizens of the saints and part of God’s household (2:19). The household is not built upon the foundation of Israel, or Moses, or Israel’s prophets but on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. We are being built together into a “home” of God (2:21). God dwelt in a temple in the midst of Israel, but today God dwells in the corporate body of His people- a personal presence that is not distanced by ceremonies, sacrifices, and a veil (1 Cor. 3:16).

The Ephesians already had some comprehension of this mystery, but they needed to be reminded that the Gentiles stand on equal ground. The Jewish believers have no special promise from God above the Gentiles. Jewish Christians have no extra privileges before God or in Christ, neither do they have a better part in their relationship to God. It is all equal (Eph. 3:6). As coheirs, we have better promises and a better covenant than Israel possessed (Heb. 8:6; 7:19,22). As joint-body [the same body] we are all part of the one new man, not Israel, not a new Israel, not a spiritual Israel (2:15). As joint-sharers, we are all part of a new household, a new family, sharing a citizenship not of this earth but of heaven (2:19-22; Php. 3:20).

Paul applies the mystery of the Christ many times in the Ephesian letter. He wished that the Christ might dwell in their hearts (Eph. 3:17). But Christ Jesus already dwell in the believer (Col. 1:27). The believer “has the Son” (1 Jh. 5:11-12). In Ephesians 3:17, the word “dwell” [*katoikeō*] does not refer to existing in a locale but of existing as a resident. Abbott-Smith gives the second definition, “to settle, dwell.”⁹ W.E. Vine gives an interpretation, “may make a home in your hearts”.¹⁰ While Christ lives in all believers, He isn’t at home in all believers. The result of having our lives adjusted to make our hearts a home for Christ is that we are grounded in love! 3:18 expresses the purpose of this grounding, that we might apprehend the magnitude (3:18) to know in our experience the love for the Christ (3:19). When

⁸ Lehman Strauss, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1957) p.149

⁹ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921) p.241

¹⁰ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, (McLean, VA.: MacDonald Publishing no date) p. 347

we appreciate this unity of believers in Christ, we can come to the place of really knowing what the love for the whole body and head is all about. We can experientially practice the new command to love (1 Jh. 13:34).

In 3:18, Paul gives the dimensions of breath, length, height, and depth. These may be metaphors for the extent of the love, however, at the end of Ephesians two, Paul spoke of us as a building, a temple, and dwelling place of God (2:19-22). The dimensions may refer to us as this building. The full dimensions of this building then references all the believers unified in Christ. The love is not reserved for one wall in that temple, or even two walls. That love is expressed to the whole building, to all believers regardless of racial-religious background. We love all in Christ.

Paul brings up the Christ again in 4:20. He distinguishes the Christ from Jesus (4:21). Paul warns believers against giving our lives to the practices come of unbelievers. Walking like unsaved Gentiles does not express what we learned about the Christ. In the Christ, we are dead to those works, dead to the sin nature, but alive unto God (Rom. 6:11). We have learned Him (i.e. the Christ) and been taught in Him. The very truth we are to express was seen in Jesus who saw things as they were and acted accordingly (Php. 2:5ff). He did not give Himself over to self indulgent practices but lives to glorify the Father and bring abundant life to those who should believe. He lived His life for others. We have learned that the Christ should live like the head. We should live by laying down our lives for one another!

Paul instructed the Ephesians to put on the new man (4:24). It has been far too common for us to read “put on the new you!” But Paul already defined the new man in 2:15 as the union of believers in Christ. We are to put on our position in Christ where we are a united part of the one new man. He writes that the new man is created. Paul wrote the same in 2:10 “We (plural - corporately) are God’s product, being created in Christ!” Corporately we are created in Christ to form the one new man, not individual little creations running around without God. Paul also expresses this truth in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If any man is in Christ - a new creation” Some English Bibles italicize words they added to give the sense the translators understood, namely that each of us is a new creation. Rather, Paul is writing of a corporate creation - the Christ! It is how we are to now see each other: in Christ and part of the new creation (2:16). We are in Christ. We are this new creation in Christ. We are part of the Christ!

If we put on this united new man, it motivates us and clears our minds to put away the lie and speak truth to our neighbors (4:25). The Lie states that the creature can do what only God can or can even replace God. The Lie is the opposite of the Truth, which states that God alone is God, and apart from Him, His creatures can do nothing of value. In the context, the Lie involves any idea or statement, to ourselves or others that we don’t need these other believers. We may agree that we need some believers, but if we have differences with other believers, especially of a racial, economic, or social nature, we are communicating the Lie. If God planned for us to all be together in Christ and the Holy Spirit places all of us into Christ, then any statement to the contrary is an expression of the Lie. God has personally humbled me in this regard on various occasion by using another believer for whom I held a poor opinion to teach or challenge me. Anger provoked to hostility, stealing rather than helping, and harsh rotten words that tear down others rather than build up are all expressions of the Lie (4:26-28). Knowledge of the new man is practical. It is a place of unity, and it causes us to recognize our constant need to depend on our divine head, Christ Jesus, for He supplies the body and directs it (4:15-16 cp Col. 2:20). We often depend upon Him, by depending upon the other believers He uses in our lives.

However, if the Gentiles determined to turn to the Law, they would have to forfeit, in practice, their new privileged position in Christ. They may join to the politics and promises of Israel but not God's promises to the new body, the one new man! We have better promises than Israel (Heb. 8:6). "Better" does not mean the same promises as Israel had. It does not mean that they get what we get. That would be contrary to the meaning of the adjective "better." In practice Israel could never draw as near as we can, when we let the Christ dwell richly in our hearts! If those of an Israeli background held their heritage as a mark of superiority over the Gentiles, they would miss out on God's purpose within the body when we live by grace. It is truly better to remain with the truth Paul taught than to follow after wolves teaching the Law for Grace believers. Notice that the Ephesians already had been taught about the Christ. In Ephesians 3:6, Paul reminds them it was a mystery. Israel never knew about this one new man! They had something better as Grace believers. They needed to remember the unsearchable riches of the Christ (3:8), directed especially at Gentiles, who had previously been poor!

The Mystery of the Dispensation of Grace

The third mystery involves the dispensation of God's grace (Eph. 3:9). Paul mentioned this mystery in 3:2 as the dispensation of the grace from God. He does not call it a mystery or explain it at that point. Paul taught the Ephesian believers daily for two years and they knew about this dispensation. Paul assumes they have already heard about this dispensation, using a Greek first-class condition "if/since indeed you have heard." So, Paul is reminding them of this truth and how it should affect their relationship with one another.

God gave Paul the responsibility of revealing¹¹ this dispensation. The dispensation was previously a mystery (3:9). "Mystery" is in the genitive case and describes the dispensation as hidden with God during the past ages (3:9). This mystery was not revealed in the Old Testament or the gospels. When God had Paul reveal it, it was a new truth.

The Word Dispensation/Administration

Translations, such as the Authorized Version, based upon the Textus Receptus likely have "fellowship" instead of "dispensation" or some other attempt to represent the noun *oikonomia*. The Textus Receptus has the word *koinonia* rather than *oikonomia*. The two words sound similar so that the one copying may have misheard the word. Both words look similar involving some of the same letters, so a copyist may have had an error of sight. The abundance of manuscript evidence favors *oikonomia*. Erasmus edited a total of seven manuscripts to form his first edition and later made changes upon consulting an eighth manuscript. Of the seven manuscripts he used, four included the epistles and potentially had bearing on Erasmus choosing *koinonia*. Three of these manuscripts date from the 12th century and one from the 15th. The Majority texts, with which the TR is often associated, have *oikonomia*, not *koinonia*. There is no sound support for *koinonia*, therefore, *oikonomia* should stand in the Greek text and our English versions should reflect this in translation.

Our English versions translate *oikonomia* "the administration" [CSB, Darby, NASB95, NIV], "plan" [ESV, NASB20, NET, NLT NRSV], "the dispensation" [ASV, AV]. The Greek word *oikonomia* is comprised of "house" [*oikos*] and "law" [*nomos*] and referred to the organization of a household. A dispensation is a principle for a house order or the management of a household.

¹¹ "Bring to light", "enlighten" [NASB20], "make plain" [NIV] translate φωτίζω, a verb with the causative ending -ιζω, therefore, to cause light to be shown, in this case on a truth.

That household may be a literal family including its workers (cp Lk. 16:1-4; Gal 4:2), or it may refer to a figurative household such as a city (Rom. 16:23).¹²

The Greek New Testament has three related forms of the word that refer to the management of a household. *Oikonomeō* is a verb meaning to manage or administrate a household. The noun *oikonomos* refers to the manager or administrator of a household. The principle used to manage a household is expressed by the noun *oikonomia*.

The Parties in a Dispensation

Three groups or individuals are involved in a dispensation. The owner of the house, the steward or manager of the house, and the household or family. These three are found in Ephesians 3:2, “the household order of the grace from God (owner) given to me (manager) for you (household).” God is always the owner or builder of the house (cf. Eph. 3:14-15; Heb. 3:3-4). This house order was given to Paul. He was the manager or steward (cp 1 Cor. 4:1-2). It was through Paul’s teaching and then primarily through his writings that God revealed this particular plan for how the one new man is to live. This order for the house was given to Paul “for us” (v.2). The Greek word “for” is a preposition emphasizing motion towards or in this case, a view towards.¹³ We the household needed to hear from Paul God’s principle for living.

Some interpreters think that Ephesians 3:2 means only that Paul had a God-given commission. However, Paul meant the exact content of His commission, the very message or way of life he was to teach believers. The manager in Luke 16 did not have a general commission from his master but was apparently in charge of his master’s property such as oil and wheat (Lk. 16:6, 7). God gave Paul the commission to explain to the household what His grace is and how it should affect the way we live. Understanding this dispensation or way of life provides a framework for appreciating the union of saints in Christ, which Paul called the mystery of the Christ (3:4, see previous posts). Knowing that Paul had a commission from God would not accomplish this, but knowing the revelation or message God gave to Paul would. Paul was given that order for us. Just as a steward dispensed the order of the home to the family, so Paul explains for us God’s grace for daily activity.

God has had more than one household in history. Paul claims that every family, whether in heaven or on earth, comes from God (Eph. 3:15). God has established these different families or households. Today, the household is the body of Christ, the one new man, the Church. The dispensation of the grace from God is not for the world. It is not how the world is saved. God has always saved people based on His grace. The body of Christ stands in contrast to Israel with whom God concerned Himself for the preceding 2,000 years. Some dispensationalists make the family or household the whole world. In Genesis 12:1ff, God singled out Abraham and his descendants. Before Genesis 12, God did deal with the world. Since Genesis 12, God has dealt with a smaller part of the whole world. God made promises to Israel that were not for the Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-13). God gave the Law to Israel but not to the nations (Ex. 34:27; Deut. 4:7-8). In the future and final dispensation, God will impose a law for their rule of life but that law will be for all people (Isa. 2:3-4). That is three distinct families or households during those three distinct periods in which God imposed three distinct house rules.

¹² The ESV, NASB20, NKJV, and CSB have “city treasurer” and the NIV has “director of public works.”

¹³ The preposition is *eis* εἰς. A.T. Robertson, *A New Short Grammar to The Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1938) pp. 255-56. See also Dana & Mantey, *op cit*, pp. 103-104.

How Many Dispensations

The scriptures identify two dispensations with the word *oikonomia*: the dispensation of God's grace (Eph. 3:2) and the dispensation of the fullness of times (Eph. 1:10). In addition to these, we find that life by the Law preceded that of God's grace. John wrote that the Law was given through Moses (Jh. 1:17). The grace and the truth came into existence by Jesus Christ (Jh. 1:17). Grace and truth are specific; each noun has the definite article - ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια. Grace and truth existed before Christ, but grace and truth as principles that frame our daily lives did not exist at that time. Law existed in the world before Moses, but God had not imposed Law as a way of life until Moses led Israel out of Egypt. The Law was given when Moses was eighty years old. Similarly, the grace and the truth didn't come to be at Christ's birth or even at the cross. They began as governing principles when Christ sent the Spirit at Pentecost (Jh. 16:7, 12-13). By contrast to grace, the Law was Israel's house rule before our present time of grace and truth.

Hebrews three addresses the distinction between Israel's life under the law and the body of Christ living under the grace. Hebrews three does not mention the house rules but the two distinct households. In the first household-Israel-Moses served as a household servant (3:5). Moses was faithful in "his house" or the household of which he was part. We are part of Christ's household over which He is a Son (3:6). The conditional phrase, "if we hold the boldness and boast related to the hope" can either mean that if the readers do not hold that boast, they truly are not part of that household and are therefore unbelievers, or that they are part of that household in practice only if they hold this boldness. Because 3:1 identifies the readers as "holy brothers" and "partakers of the heavenly calling" they are part of the household but are only living as members when they hold this boldness. The writer ties this boldness to God's throne of **grace** in 4:16. Approaching the throne of grace is how one answers the heavenly calling of 3:1, and how one holds that boldness. Hebrews shows two dispensations by identifying two distinct families or households.

Dispensationalists identify other dispensations by considering changes. Something existed before the Law, so we may say that a fourth dispensation exists. Something changed when Adam sinned and was made to leave the garden, so we may identify a fifth. Many (I included) see also a change with the flood, and another when God called Abraham and began to focus on a more limited group of people. Though dispensationalists may identify several dispensations, the Scriptures plainly identify three: the Law, the Grace, and a principle for the fullness of times which is another form of law. These three are the subject of most of Scripture's revelation.

The Change from Law to Grace.

We are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:11). Neither of the words law or grace have definite articles in the Greek text of Romans 6:11. This means that Paul includes more than just the Law of Moses but anything classified as law. It does include the Law of Moses but is broader. New Testament believers are not under law as a rule of life. Rather we are under grace, and grace is our rule of life (Eph. 3:2). I am representing the word dispensation, administration, or plan as "rule of life." Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to all who believe (Rom. 10:4). Christ blotted out the rule of the law and took it out of the way (Col. 2:14). The commandments were "set aside" [ESV, NET, NIV] or annulled (Heb. 7:18). The Hebrew readers would have understood "commandments" to refer to the commandments that came through Moses. These were set aside to make way for a better hope that could cause maturity

(Heb. 7:19). Peter calls it a living hope (1 Pet. 1:3-4). Instead of hoping in dead sacrifices, we hope in a living Savior.

Those opposed to the Biblical revelation of the dispensation of grace often make three claims they think are in favor of their position and demonstrate dispensationalism to be in error. First, they often assert that dispensationalism teaches different ways of salvation. Certain dispensationalists of the past have made statements that can be understood to mean that Israel under the law was saved by obeying the Law. However, David, who lived under the Law, knew he was righteous and forgiven without works (Rom. 4:6-8). The Law was never a means of eternal salvation or righteousness before God. The Law proscribed how Israel could have access to God at the tent and later the temple. The tent was a place for Israel to meet God (Ex. 29:42-44). Israel had to be clean and holy by the standard of the Law so they could approach God (Lev. 11:44, 1-43). By obeying the Law, Israel gained the legal right to approach God through the priests.

Second, they teach that the only law that is set aside is the ceremonial law, teaching that the law included moral, ceremonial, and civil aspects. However, the apostles viewed the law as a whole, not three parts. Paul stated that one was obligated to guard the whole law (Gal. 5:3). James stated that keeping the whole law, but falling in one part, one bore the full guilt (Jas. 2:10). Paul cited Deuteronomy 27:26 that one came under the Law's curse for not abiding in all that was written in the Law (Gal. 3:10). That God viewed the Law as a whole and not parts can be seen in Romans 7:6-8. We have been released or made idle [καταργέω] separated [ἀπὸ] from the Law (7:6). Paul then cites the tenth command against "coveting" (7:7-8). If we allow for the divisions of the law, "coveting" was not ceremonial law, but moral. Therefore, Paul's assertion that we are released from the law includes being released from its moral commands.

Third, they state that any who refuse to live by the Law of Moses are antinomian. Antinomianism teaches, "since Christ not only bore the penalty of sin but also met the positive demands of the law, the believer is free from the obligation to observe it, an error that is still with us today in some of the forms of dispensationalism. This is a thoroughly false position, for it is only the law as a system of penalty and as a method of salvation that is abolished in the death of Christ. The law as the standard of our moral life is a transcript of the holiness of God and is therefore of permanent validity also for the believer, though his attitude to the law has undergone a radical change." [Berkhof:543] By arguing against the teaching of the dispensation of grace, Berkhof has wrongly understood the law and even stated that it was a method of salvation, a position he accuses dispensationalists of taking.

Biblically, antinomianism is the teaching that the believer has no standard for living. The Bible teaches God has a standard for us, but it is not the Law. Though some charged C.I. Scofield with promoting antinomianism, he addressed the question of whether the believer is under law, "'Not under the law,' standing alone is antinomianism. 'Not under the law, but under grace,' is the gospel of liberty, and ensures loving obedience—something the law never did, nor ever can do." [Scofield: 76]. Paul states that God's grace, not law, trains us as children to say, no, to ungodliness and worldly cravings, and to live with an attitude that reflects salvation, to live righteously, and to live in a manner that honors God, and to live with the anticipation for our Lord's happy appearing (Tit. 2:11-13). God calls us to know who we are in Christ by His grace and live so as to match that in conduct, or "worthy" (Eph. 1:3, 6; 4:1-2). This is grace living and is far from antinomian, though in no way does it encourage us to observe the commands of the Law.

These three points frustrate non-dispensationalists. The problem revolves around letting go of the law as a way of life, because they often teach that the Law is God's eternal moral standard of His will for us. Living by grace is actually a higher standard. When we live by grace, we can fulfill the new command issued by Christ the night before He was crucified. He told only the eleven believing disciples, "A **new** command I give to you, that you love one another as I loved you." (Jh. 13:34). Before this, because the Law was in effect, the highest command was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deut. 6:5). The second, which sounds slightly similar to the new command was "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18). The standard of the old command was "yourself." The standard of the new command is Christ—"as I have loved you." Unless we should be arrogant about ourselves, a vast, even infinite gap, distinguishes those two commands. Grace characterizes our call to love, "Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, just as Christ loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma." (Eph. 5:1-2). If we focus on God's gracious provisions for us, it would move us a long way in letting go of law and unto God's heavenly calling in Christ Jesus (Php. 3:14). It is a calling by the Spirit to rest in Christ. Answering this call results in a life that honors God, a life that is not silent or still but lays hold of and lives out eternal life.

How is God's grace our rule of life?

Not being under law but under grace means we are free from sin (Rom. 6:14). The Law brought the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20). The Law caused us to know sin because we fail—we sin (Rom. 7:7-8). So, how does grace free us?

For earlier studies on the nature of the Law and the Christian way of life by grace, see

Grace is God's attitude in which He thinks, relates, and acts in a good manner towards others regardless of whether they deserve it. By the way, we don't deserve any of it. So, we are in Christ. More than one hundred times the New Testament writers tell us that we are in Christ, in the Lord, in Him, in Whom, etc.. God says we died with Christ and were buried with Him (Rom. 6:3-4). God says we are made alive, raised, and seated in Christ (Eph. 2:5-6). Because we died with Christ to our sinful nature, God says we are free of condemnation (Rom. 8:1). In Christ, He says we are redeemed and forgiven (Eph. 1:7). He says we are righteous in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). He says we are holy and without blame (Eph. 1:4). He says we are sons (Eph. 1:5). All these things He says about us are "blessings" or "good words" about us in Christ (Eph. 1:3). They are good words about us in the heavenly places and in Christ. All these good things He says about us are by His grace to us in the Beloved, in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:6). We do not deserve that God should say any of these good things about us in Christ, therefore, they are all by His grace.

We live by grace by living in light of these blessings, these good things that God says about us. We are to walk or live worthy of our calling (Eph. 4:1). This calling is in Christ. It is an upward call in Christ Jesus (Php. 3:14). The Greek word translated "worthy" is ἀξιῶς [axiōs] and it involves the idea of value based on weighing an item. Think of a set of balance scales with an item on one side and various weights added to the other to determine how heavy the item is. So, to be worthy is to match or be in balance to what is on the other side of the scale. To live worthy of our calling means our lifestyle is consistent with what God says about us in Christ. If God says we died with Christ to the sin *nature*, then living worthy means we live free of the sin nature. It means we "count ourselves to be dead ones to the sin nature in Christ" (Rom. 6:11). If God says we are alive and raised with Christ, then living worthy means we live as

those who are alive to God (Rom. 6:11). Because God says we are all part of one body in Christ, living worthy means that we live to guard the unity of believers in that body (Eph. 4:3-4). This is the essence of living by grace: knowing what God says about us and living in light of that.

God's grace trains us to live as His children (Tit. 2:11-12). His grace trains us to say no to (deny) ungodliness and worldly cravings. Ungodliness [*asebeia*] designates actions which dishonor God, which insult or respond rudely to Him and His provisions. Because God has freed us from sin in Christ and because He says all these good things about us in Christ, treating Him with dishonor is inconsistent with His grace; it is out of balance with whom He says we are. His grace also trains us to say no to worldly cravings. Worldly cravings misuse what God has given us. He gives us love to show to others. The world asks us to love it and its things (1 Jh. 2:15). It distracts us from the proper objects of our love. Worldly cravings attempt to find fulfillment in things other than God. God's grace points us to His unselfish love for us and appeals for us to consider living in keeping with His grace.

God's grace also trains us to live with an attitude saturated with the truths of our salvation (Tit. 2:12). The adverb *σωφρόνως* [*sōphronōs*], translated "sensibly" or "self-controlled," is a compound of *sōtēria* - "salvation" and *phren* - "frame of mind." It meant a safe way of thinking because one thought in terms of one's physical safety. In this context, it involves our spiritual salvation. Because God by His grace has given us such a great salvation, to live sensibly is to live with an attitude that reflects our salvation. By His grace, God says we are righteous in Christ, so His grace trains us to live righteously. Because God has been so gracious with us, His grace trains us to live in a manner that honors God, that shows how great He has been to us.

When Christ returns for us, we will see Him as He is and we will be like Him (1 Jh. 3:2). We will be fully alive, just as He says we are alive in Him. We will be fully free from sin in every aspect of our life, just as He counts us to be now. So, His grace train us to look forward to His glorious appearing for us (Tit. 2:13). At His appearing, He will bring grace to us and finish what He has started (1 Pet. 3:13). All these are what God's grace trains us to do. The Law does not train us in this way. Grace does not train us to live unrestrained and in sin. It trains us to live free to God's glory.

Furthermore, grace training is neither a carrot on a stick nor a stick to prod us from behind. That's law. Grace does not promise us more blessings or material blessings. Neither does God by His grace threaten us with the potential loss of any of these blessings. That too would be law. Rather, He calls us to live in the security of His great salvation: our past salvation, our present salvation, and our future.

Peter describes Paul's message of grace living by God's patience (longsuffering) (2 Pet. 3:15). False teachers had twisted the teaching about God's grace into a license for living in sexual immorality (2 Pet. 2:1-2; cp Jd. 4). They taught this truth because under grace, God does not automatically or immediately punish believers when we sin. Therefore, because some could seemingly get away with sin, they concluded that was the purpose of God's grace, to let us explore our nature. They, of course, are wrong. So, Peter tells us to consider God's patience as salvation. He means present tense salvation or growth. God is patient with us by His grace because He is allowing us time to grow. Peter states that others do not get this truth and twist it to their own ruination. Using grace as an excuse to live immorally brings only problems and ruin in one's life experience. Peter adds that they do this to the rest of Scripture also. They misread, misapply, misunderstand the rest of Scripture and cause themselves problems by doing so. So, often quoted but seldom understood, Peter instructs us to grow by means of grace

and by means of a real knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (3:18). Grace is not an excuse for immorality, but a means for us to grow. We also grow by means of our knowledge of who Jesus Christ is. If we want to live by grace, we need to know who Christ is for us right now. It isn't about what He did during the Old Testament times or during His earthly ministry. It is about His character as He sits at the Father's right hand. He died and is risen and God says both are true of the believer in Christ. He sits in heaven and God says the believer is seated in heaven in Christ. Christ is fully righteous in every aspect of His being and God says the believer is righteous in Christ. If we do not get to know who Christ is right now, we will struggle to know who we are in Christ and we lose an opportunity for growth. God's plan is for us to grow.

The Dispensation of Grace and Kingdom Truth

Paul calls this present order of grace a mystery because its character was unknown before its inception. That applies also to the earthly ministry of Christ. The order of Law was plain but this order of grace was unknown. At the beginning of Christ's earthly ministry, He entered the synagogue of Nazareth and read a portion of scripture from Isaiah 61 (Lk. 4:18-19). He ends the reading of that passage with, "To preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (v.17). He didn't continue reading beyond that phrase for the next portion anticipated Christ's future advent. He only wanted to look at His first advent. He came to proclaim His kingdom and all the blessings of that Kingdom under His full direction as Israel's anointed King. We know the Jews rejected Him as King (Matt. 27:27-29, 37, 42). Christ had claimed to be their anointed King (Lk. 23:1-3) but Israel did not desire a righteous King (Jh. 19:14-15; 19-22). God knew Israel would reject Christ as king, and planned in this way for Christ to be crucified in order to secure our salvation. From the beginning, God planned this dispensation of grace, but did not reveal it until the basis of salvation was carried out in Christ's death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and present seated place at the Father's right hand. Our very way of life by grace rests on the fact that this is settled and that we are also seated in Christ by God's grace (Eph. 2:5-6).

Because the first advent ended with Christ's rejection and the rejection of the accompanying Kingdom, "the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn" (Isaiah 61:26) did not come! Remember, this was God's plan. God has no plan B. Israel still awaits the day when Christ will roar from Zion with all His saints to be King over all the earth (Joel 3:16; Zech. 14:5,9). Many have described Christ's two advents as two hills with a valley between. From a distance, a prophet such as Isaiah saw the two hills as one and could not see the valley between. The prophets saw one event because they could not see another event that intervenes. So this present dispensation was unknown even during the earthly ministry of Christ.

Christ came as a minister of the circumcision (Rom. 15:8). He came to confirm the promises to Israel's fathers. When He sent out His disciples, He told them not to go to the Gentiles (Matt. 10:5-6). Jesus was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15:24). His ministry was to Israel.

Jesus' ministry was to proclaim the kingdom God had promised to Israel. The Old Testament prophesied that He would shoulder the government and sit on the throne of David (Isa. 9:6, 7). A few in Israel still expected the kingdom to come, though many had given up hope that it would. Simeon was eagerly awaiting [*προσδέχομαι/prosdechomai*] the comfort of Israel (Lk. 2:25). The prophetess Anna was also anticipating the ransom of Jerusalem (Lk. 2:38). To those who were not anticipating the kingdom, Jesus called them to repent, to change their minds because the kingdom was near (Matt. 4:17). As he went from town to town, He

proclaimed the good news about the kingdom (Matt. 4:23). Matthew five through seven is one account of that message.

Jesus begins by sharing the reasons various people will find happiness in the kingdom. However, not everyone inherits the kingdom. The kingdom and its benefits were for the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the gentle (tame), those hungering for righteousness, those demonstrating mercy, the pure in heart, peacemakers, and those persecuted because of righteousness or insulted because of Jesus. Those listening to Jesus' message, and He repeated this basic message many times in many places, had to consider whether they were among these or among those who needed to repent. Most found, they needed to repent.

Jesus calls the people to be salt and light for the earth (Matt. 5:13-14). God had promised Israel the earth (cp. Matt. 5:5). The earth was preserved for them. However, if they did not live with the anticipation of that kingdom, their lives would degenerate into sin and the sad treatment of their fellow Jews (Mt. 24:48-49). This is why Jesus called them to repent and now calls them to live like the salt that would act as a preservative for the promised earth.

Israel's failure was to excuse themselves from God's Law. Christ did not come to abolish the Law (Matt. 5:17). The verb "abolish" [καταλύω/kataluō] meant to dissolve, destroy, or demolish. His purpose was to fulfill the Law. Even in the Law, God promised to bring Israel back to their land and back to Himself (Deut. 30:1-5). This statement should not be taken to refer to us, but Israel to whom God gave the Law. For us, Christ has ended the Law, so that we are not under Law. For Israel and God's promises to them the Law was still in effect. It would remain in effect until Christ fulfilled those promises.

Israel's religious leaders appeared the epitome of righteousness, but Christ required greater righteousness for those who would enter the kingdom (Matt. 5:20). The Law forbid murder, but Jesus warned against anger (Matt. 5:21-22). Those guilty of even speaking in anger were in danger of "fiery hell." The Law forbid adultery, but Jesus forbid looking at women with the intent to lust (5:27-28). Those guilty of looking at a woman in this way were in danger of being thrown into hell (5:29). This, of course, had implications regarding divorce (5:31-32). These three statements demonstrate a problem for grace believers. Are we in danger of hell if we cross these lines? If so, then we are under a law. If so, we are not saved by grace but by works. Some teachers, attempting to make this applicable to us, have stated that Jesus was speaking in hyperbole-exaggerating. Jesus did not exaggerate. He warned this crowd, most of whom were unbelieving Jews, that Hell is real and they were in danger because they lacked the right kind of righteousness. He would eventually tell them that they needed seek God's kingdom and His righteousness (6:33). They needed to seek His kingdom, because they were not in it.

In that future, when God establishes this aspect of the kingdom, He will put the law in the hearts of believers (Jer. 31:31-34). They will not cross these lines. The only ones in danger of crossing these lines will be unbelievers because they will not have the law written in their hearts. Their only motivation for obeying God will be fear of punishment-that's law. Believers (not us) in that kingdom will not only have proper motivation but will have this inner law that will govern their conduct. Do not equate this with the results of regeneration today. No where in the New Testament do we find that God writes or has written the law in our hearts. Rather, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit dwell in us. Our good desires come not from the Law but from the Father Himself, who works for us to desire (will, θέλειν) on behalf of His good pleasure (Php. 2:13). We have a different relationship to God and a different relationship to law-we're not under it.

Even the “Lord’s prayer” communicates law truth not grace. God grants forgiveness of trespasses when individuals would give others (Matt. 6:14-15). If they did not forgive others, God would not forgive them. That is not our experience under grace. We deal graciously with others because God has already dealt graciously with us (Col. 3:13). If we mix the sermon law with grace teaching, we ruin grace teaching. If our forgiveness should depend upon whether we forgive, we have resorted to a law system.

Jesus instructed the Jews not to judge one another (Matt. 7:1). He told them that they would be judged by the same standard they used with others (7:2). Jesus told them to exercise self-judgment before they dealt with others (7:3-5). This again is a law standard, because what we do earns our future, in this case the measure of how God will judge us.

Jesus charged them not to give the holy to dogs (Matt. 7:6). In the context, the dogs refers again to the Gentiles (Matt. 15:26-27). Jesus’s ministry was to the Jews, not the Gentiles. He would later forbid His disciples from going to the Gentiles. The present charge demonstrates that even at the outset of His preaching ministry, Jesus was holding out the promise of the kingdom for Israel, not the Gentiles. This does not agree with the revelation of the mystery of the Christ and the mystery of the present house-rule of God’s grace.

Finally, Jesus's charge for these crowds of Jews to “enter through the narrow gate” (Matt. 7:13), demonstrates that He was not speaking to a crowd of believers, nor was He establishing a standard for Christian living. He was speaking about the kingdom God promised Israel. He was correcting their false understanding about the nature of the kingdom and what it took to enter. One could not enter the kingdom simply because one was an Israeli. Each had to recognize his personal unworthiness regarding this kingdom. One could claim to have been in Jesus’ company, prophesied, cast out demons, or did miracles in Jesus’ name, but none of that was enough (Matt. 7:21-22). Jesus would still tell them to depart (7:23).

The sermon on the mount, read plainly, does not detail the life of the grace believer. It does not agree with what it means to live by the standard of grace today. Yes, it came directly from the mouth of Jesus, but not everything Jesus uttered during His earthly ministry is intended for our lives as New Testament believers. In fact much of what He said was for Israel, and mixing the two does not result in the lifestyle that God desires for us today.

How is God’s grace our rule of life? part 2

What does it mean to live by grace? It means to allow God to do for us what He desires to do in spite of our complete unworthiness. In the Ephesian letter, Paul writes, “For by means of grace you are saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8a). The word “saved” is a perfect participle emphasizing the existing state or result.¹⁴ With the verb “are” Paul makes this intensive.¹⁵ We might expand this verse, “For by means of grace you are in a state of being saved . . .” We know our salvation is not yet finished. We await the day of complete redemption (Eph. 4:30). Still, our salvation is secure! It is secure because grace in salvation did not end the moment we believed. We are still in this place of being saved by God’s grace (that’s the emphasis of the perfect participle)!

We may ignore God’s grace, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. When we sin, God’s grace is most active (Rom. 5:20). It goes into overdrive. God doesn’t encourage us to live so that

¹⁴ Earnest DeWitt Burton, *Moods and Tenses in the Greek New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900) p.38.

¹⁵ Dana & Mantey op cit. p. 232

grace will increase (Rom. 6:1-2) but to live by grace through the access of faith (Rom. 5:2). Our entire position in Christ is a gracious position. We do not deserve it, which is why we are said to be graced in the beloved (Eph. 1:7). Paul told Timothy to be made strong by the grace that is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:1). Romans 5:2 tell us that we have access to God because of that grace.¹⁶

Grace and faith cooperate but neither cooperates with works or law. In fact our very salvation begins when we stop working and believe (Rom. 4:5). Faith is not a work! A man is justified by faith without any works of the Law (Rom. 3:27). Justification by faith stands in contrast to works of the Law so that is might be by grace (Rom. 4:16). Paul reminds us that grace and works cancel each other out (Rom. 11:6). There can be no mixture of the two for they negate the character of the other.

But grace and faith are not limited to our initial justification, but also of our walk or way of life. The righteous person lives by faith. But the Law isn't of faith. If we are to walk by faith (2 Cor. 5:7), we can not give our attention to the keeping of the works of the Law. If one chooses not to walk by faith (Gal. 5:5,6) but seeks to be justified by the Law, he falls from grace (Gal. 5:4). This does not express a loss of salvation but a falling in practice and experience from the grace of our position in Christ. When a believer is trying to live by law, he is not enjoying the gracious benefits of who he is in Christ. They remain true of him, but he is not relating to them.

This cooperation of grace and faith extends to this present dispensation. Remember that Timothy was having problems with Law teachers in Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:4,7). Some were paying attention to matters of law. Paul said that believers should pay attention to "the dispensation from God, the one by means of faith."

Living in the present household order, doesn't require us to be a Jew; doesn't improve if we are Jewish, or in any way change if one is a Jew. The myths concerning the heritage of people had little to do with maturity! The dispensation, the one in faith, provides for maturing. We mature by walking by faith. In Hebrews 7, we read, that the law made nothing perfect or mature. In contrast, the bringing in of a better hope did. Hope that is based in the promises of God is the basis for Biblical faith (Heb. 11:1). We walk by faith in a better hope! God's order for the household of faith (Gal. 6:10) is to walk in the grace in which we stand (Rom. 5:2). We walk by faith by believing God's promises to us as believers, promises that rest upon His grace.

The result of this cooperative order of grace and faith is a life consisting of God's work in us rather than our working towards God's favor. Prior to this present dispensation, grace could be earned. Noah found favor in God's eyes due to his pure bloodline (Gen. 6:8,9). Moses and Mary also found favor in God's eyes (Ex. 33:17; Lk. 1:30). In each passage the word translated "favor" is the word "grace."¹⁷ Favor is a good translation of these examples for it demonstrates a distinction between grace today and grace before the cross. Grace as we understand it has always been unmerited, but as part of their lives, grace was earned.

Under the Law and Kingdom Law, blessings were/are provided for obedience (Deut. 28:1-2; Matt. 5:3-11). Under the present order of grace and faith we are to be obedient because

¹⁶ A minor textual problem has resulted in the word *oikodomē* οἰκοδομη-"edification". This reading is supported by one primary Western text as opposed to a widespread agreement of Alexandrian, Western, and Byzantine texts for "dispensation".

¹⁷ In the Old Testament יָן and in the New Testament χάρις .

of the blessings we already have received. Since we live by the Spirit we are to walk by, be led by, be filled by the Spirit (Gal. 5:28, 18; Eph. 5:18). Since we are children of light, we are to walk thusly (Eph. 5:8). Under the Law a Jew was asked to love God with everything he had, but now we are to love like Christ loved us (Lk. 10:27; Jh. 13:24).

But if these Ephesians determined to turn to the Law, they would no longer be walking by faith. They would be trying to earn God's blessings. If they were to live under the Law rather than grace, they would be attempting to grow in their salvation by works rather than by grace. Since the Law prevented maturity that would not work and they would remain immature compared to Grace believers.

But not only would their lives change but their status. Under Law, Jews and Gentiles did not stand on equal ground. There was a distinction between a true Jew and a proselyte. It is for this reason that Paul tied the mystery of the Christ and the dispensation of grace together in this chapter. We are united on equal ground with Jew and Gentile in Christ and made part of the one new man because we are under a different order and part of a new household. To turn to the Law would mean a forfeiture of the tremendous blessings of the new household order of grace.

The Mystery Gospel

The final mystery in Ephesians involves a gospel (Eph. 6:19). Gospel means good news. If we are unsaved and learn that Christ died for our sins and rose again so that we can be right with God, that is good news! Once we have believed and are saved, all the truths expressed in these mysteries can be considered good news. And that is exactly what Paul means!

In Romans 16:25, Paul said that God is able to establish or make believers firm. He establishes believers according to a gospel, a proclamation about Jesus Christ, and the revelation of the mystery. God's goal is firm, solid, immovable believers as opposed to those who are tossed to and fro and live in uncertainty. People live in uncertainty because they view their lives and God's works on a law basis. They expect good works to result in benefits for us and our sins and failures to bring judgment. They worry that our sin might change our relationship with God so that our future with God is negatively affected. However, knowing this good news about God's grace in every aspect of our lives corrects this errant way of thinking. Knowing who Jesus Christ is for us right now corrects this errant way of thinking. This mystery about God's grace rejects the imposition of law in the life of believers.

Paul calls this gospel, "My gospel" (Romans 16:25). In Galatians 2, Paul states that the Church recognized that Paul had a gospel for the Gentiles and Peter had one for the Jews (Gal 2:7-8). Many interpret this simply to mean that Paul was taking the gospel to Gentiles and Peter was taking the same gospel to the Jews. This is not what Paul says. The reason Paul went to Jerusalem was to lay out his gospel before the apostles (2:2). He had received that gospel by revelation from the Lord not from men (1:11-12). Paul meant this good news for Christian living by God's grace. Paul meant this good news that did not teach Gentile believers to live by law. Peter was originally telling new Jewish believers to continue obeying the law as a way of life. As stated before, the Law was never a means of initial salvation, even during the Old Testament times. "My gospel" is that message about who we are in Christ and how God calls us to live in balance with that truth. God uses that message to stabilize believers.

Knowing this truth helps stabilize believers against being tossed about by wrong teaching. We all know believers who have been tossed about by every wind of doctrine. It was a problem in Ephesus (Eph. 4:14). In this text, "doctrine" translates the Greek *didaskalia*, a noun

referring to teaching with which we agree but we do not practice. Frequently it refers to Old Testament truths. The related word *didaché* emphasizes truth intended to be practiced! When Christ gave instruction for the practices in His Kingdom, Matthew refers to it as *didaché* (Matt. 7:28-29). The teaching of the apostles for the Church is also described by this term (Acts 2:42). The two words are contrasted in Titus 1:9, “Holding to the faithful word, measured by *didaché*, in order that he may be able to both exhort by the healthy *didaskalia* and convince the contradicting ones.” If a believer holds fast to the teaching about our Christian life, a life by God’s grace, it will keep his Old Testament doctrine healthy. He sees the nature of God’s grace and all God’s provisions and it stands in stark contrast to law. He finds value in all Scripture but recognizes that it is not all for his way of life.

If we realize what we have under this present household of grace, we won’t be so foolish as to try and live in a different household ordered by Law, whether Mosaic or Kingdom. Whenever we fail to understand our new future, our new standing in grace, and our new position in Christ, we will tend to turn to the Mosaic Law or to the *didaché* of Christ for the Kingdom. We’ll sink into legalism, immaturity, and become puffed up, teaching about things we don’t understand.

When Paul stood before the elders and people in Jerusalem, he was faced with the opportunity of correcting the error of being zealous¹⁸ for the Law (Acts 21:20). Paul should have stood and spoken the truths he writes in this letter. He should have stood his ground. Instead, Paul reinforced the error that Grace believers can be zealous for the Law. His actions said it is OK to live carefully by the Law. He allowed them to continue to mix law and grace for Christian living.

When Paul writes the Ephesians, he asks that they would request God to give him boldness to open his mouth to speak the mystery gospel (Eph. 6:19). Paul didn’t lack boldness when he proclaimed the gospel for initial salvation. He lacked boldness to tell the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that they were to leave Judaism and begin living under grace (Heb. 13:12-13). He spoke these Christian-living truths when he walked among the Gentiles and the Jews that lived among the Gentiles. But when he was faced with the great number of believing Jews in Jerusalem, he was not bold. All New Testament believers, regardless of background, need to hear the good news about God’s grace in every facet of the Christian’s life. By asking for help in speaking this good news boldly, Paul is acknowledging the need of Jewish Christians to move into a Christian way of life rather than a law way of life. This was important for the Ephesian church where it appears that the Gentile Christians were being treated like second-class Christians.

Paul knew that many needed to hear this good news. They needed to know about this whole new household, this new standing, this new future, etc. It is good news to know that the sphere of our existence is not that of the Law (Mosaic or Kingdom) but Grace. It is good news to know that we are united to my Lord and far more intimately than any Jew ever conceived. It is good news to know that our future is different and better than that promised to the Jews. The Ephesian believers needed to know and remember this. They needed to hold this good news because dividing the body along the racial religious lines of Jew and Gentile negatively impacts our conduct. We miss out on enjoying the love for the whole body.

The Bible contains other mysteries concerning God the Father and the Christ (Col. 2:2-3); Christ’s indwelling (Col. 1:25-27); Godliness (1 Tim. 3:16); Israel’s blindness (Rom. 11:25);

¹⁸ Zeal pushed to extremes and given great attention is called a work of the flesh (Gal. 5:20) [A.V. emulations]

the Rapture (1 Cor. 15:51ff); Lawlessness (2 Thess. 2:6-12). Jesus spoke some mysteries the disciples needed to know about His kingdom. In Ephesians, Paul mentions only four, each of which turns the Grace believer's attention to the better things we have. If we give our attention to these mysteries, we see more clearly God's present dealings with the body of Christ. Understanding what He is doing helps us cooperate with His present purpose and that means relating to each other as He desires.

Do you appreciate who you are in Christ? Do you recognize that the Law is done. Do you realize that God does not intend for you to live your Christian life by the Law or even the principles of the Law? I would encourage you to read Ephesians in one sitting. Consider what Paul says God has done. Consider when he begins calling believers to a certain way of life. Consider whether he ties that way of life to who God says we are in Christ. I think you will find the letter of Ephesians still speaks today as part of God's revelation for our Christian lives.