

THE MYSTERY OF HIS PLAN

I need to pull a few threads together now. And it will be nothing in comparison to all the threads Paul was pulling together. I do hope the Spirit will give you ears to hear – not hear me, but Paul. We spent some time, as *The New Church* was forming, studying Paul's letter to the Colossians. There are many similarities between Colossians and Ephesians. I won't argue the case until this coming Wednesday evening, but it would appear that Paul writes to the Colossians with the issue between Onesimus and Philemon especially on his mind. Then as he is writing, themes that have been forming in his awareness come onto the pages of the letter, and Paul starts to see them with greater clarity than ever before. What he calls "the mystery" is intriguing and amazing him more and more. This mystery is curious, since Paul doesn't imagine that God ever tried to hide it. It is the mystery of God's real plan, and it is only hidden because we humans have not had experience enough or development enough to see it.

In Colossians 1:26, Paul calls it a "mystery hidden for ages." In the next verse he says that "the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery." It is a curious thing for a Jew to be saying that Gentiles are the riches of the unfolding plan and purpose of God. In any case, it would appear that Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians shortly after writing his letter to the Colossians. And in Ephesians the theme finally comes into full focus. Paul is so excited he can barely contain himself. If we don't feel that, we are not hearing Ephesians. His words are tumbling all over each other trying to make it clear and set it before all the churches of Asia. We are staying in the first chapter this morning, but Paul has much to say about this mystery throughout the letter, and especially in chapter three. Even though the mystery was never intentionally hidden, it took a revelation to get it into Paul's awareness. (Ephesians 3:3) Former generations did not know. (Ephesians 3:5)

What could possibly be so high, so mind-boggling, that though unhidden, it would escape the world's attention for so long? It is God's plan to unite (to bring together) all things in Christ Jesus – things in heaven and on earth. All our problems come from disunity. Sin is separation, alienation. The plan to unite all things includes not only individuals and peoples – nations and races and genders and religions – but structures, systems of authority, angels, spiritual powers. Everything that has been alienated from God – causing mayhem and turmoil and

anguish throughout all Creation (which in Paul's mind includes both heaven and earth) – is about to be *and is now being* brought into harmony and unity in Christ Jesus.

Never mind for the moment whether you see this or believe this. Paul is seeing it and believing it! And that is why he is so excited he can barely contain himself. It is all starting to come together for Paul (click in his mind) to explain the incredible wonders he has been sensing and seeing and experiencing. Why would God send the Messiah at this point in time? That is, in Paul's lifetime. Why would God raise Him from the dead? Why would Paul be allowed to meet Him, and to know that He really is the Risen Lord? Why would Paul be commissioned as a special messenger to the Gentiles? And once started on his new career as an apostle – and despite all his hardships and trials – how is it that everywhere Paul goes, people are responding so dramatically? Groups of Christians are springing up everywhere. Not only do they spring up wherever Paul sets foot, and not only do they survive and thrive though he has no time to stay with them for very long, but by the time Ephesians is being written, these little groups of Christians are spawning other churches faster than Paul can keep track of it.

Obviously something huge is afoot. Paul is neither causing it nor creating it. He has merely been drawn into it. He is part of it – doing what he can. And so we come to the kicker, the mind-boggler part: Paul is not simply making Jewish converts with a twist of Jesus added in. Jesus, remember, was a Jew. That made it easier for Jewish converts to Christianity – that is, Jews who believed in the resurrection. Most of them started out just assuming that new converts had to turn Jewish. Christianity could be new on a personal level, but it was still the “old way” beyond that – the “ways of the world”: us against them. That's the way the world had always thought. How could they be expected to suddenly see it differently?

Yet Paul *is* seeing it differently. Because of special revelation, Paul knows that Jesus' authority outranks Moses. So more and more he is going with Jesus all the way. He has been seeing it more and more as he goes. *“Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the Law], for in Christ Jesus you are all full children of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus ... and all heirs [of God] according to the promise.”* (Galatians 3:25-29)

Yes, Paul has been seeing it more and more. But now he sees it as the mystery of God's real plan from the beginning. He sees the waves – the repercussions of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the presence of the Holy Spirit – sweeping over all Creation. It is the unfolding of the mystery sweeping across the entire cosmos. Christ's authority is way bigger than anybody thought, and it is already in the process of bringing unity and harmony to all Creation far beyond what anybody could have imagined.

Paul is connecting other threads as well. Surely others are connecting them too, but not on the levels Paul is seeing them. This mystery of God's plan is here – and going into effect now! It has always been here, of course – from the beginning. But it has been “on hold” – sort of like the Great Scroll in Revelation, sealed with seven seals until One worthy comes to break the seals. Only, the Worthy One has come! Where do we think John gets his inspiration? So the mystery is on the move, and picking up more and more people every day.

Paul is realizing more and more clearly that Jesus has broken past all the “ways of the world” – past all the “us against them” constructs. The mystery will bring unity and harmony for us all, and between us all. That is staggering. That had never been contemplated before. Oh, to be sure, unity had long been part of every great plan, but it was always understood as a unity of everyone coming over to our way: there would be unity when everyone had turned Jewish (or Hellenistic or Christian or Muslim or whatever).

The prophet Jeremiah had come closest. *“Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah. Not like the old covenant which I made with their fathers....”* (Jeremiah 31:31-32) And Jeremiah goes on to describe a time when the Holy Spirit would direct the lives of each of us, not some written rule or some coercion from outside. That was incredible indeed, but even Jeremiah had not contemplated a breakthrough past the clans, tribes, and nations that go to war against each other for the success and survival rewards of this world. Who gets the land, and who gets to keep it? Even Jeremiah saw the New Covenant in terms of “the house of Israel, and the house of Judah.”

Paul is now connecting the mystery of God's plan with “the New Covenant in Christ's blood” – and it is for everyone. In fact, every time we partake of the Communion Meal, we are claiming allegiance to this

New Covenant in Christ Jesus. Paul now sees this as spreading unity and harmony to everyone, everywhere. It is not a new regime coercing everyone into unity. It is not yet the “Christian West” against the East or the Middle East. Christianity is not yet seen as a political entity. It is more like the unseen power of Christ’s love flooding across the world – not harming anything, but transforming everything. That is matching Paul’s experience. He never knows who will respond, or how. To be sure, many hate and try to harm him. But everywhere he goes, surprising things happen. Unlikely people “get it”: they respond; they become influential participants in the new churches. And they come from every imaginable background, religion, race, and experience.

It isn’t just the grand and glorious “larger picture” that Paul sees. He also sees the little groups of new believers as the evidence and the agents of this unfolding of the mystery of God’s true purpose. Again and again we hear him saying that he gives thanks for the little band of believers that he is writing to. He gives thanks for them, and he prays for them. Do we imagine that this is just PR? That it’s just Paul being polite, or trying to “butter up” the members of the church he is writing to? No, this is part of the mystery unfolding. God doesn’t just wave magic wands to accomplish his purpose. It must be embodied in real people everywhere. Unity and harmony are *never* easy or automatic in our kind of world. To be real, the mystery must actually take root and grow in the lives of real people. It has to change us and our lives; it has to transform our relationships; it must change our goals, our values, and our choices – or none of it is real. The mystery of God’s real purpose cannot be faked. How many times have I wanted to go to heaven, without wanting to change any of the ways I live here on earth? Am I brain-dead? If you transport me to heaven the way I am now, how long would it stay heavenly? Ten seconds? Maybe twelve?

However grand and glorious this mystery is, Paul knows that the process will not be immediate or automatic. He has already lived “in the world” longer than he at first expected would be necessary. The wave of this newness – this incredible unity and harmony – is truly amazing. But the resistance of the old order is also amazing and tenacious. Many of Paul’s former friends and relatives cannot see it or do not like it – they will not come with Jesus or cooperate with the unfolding mystery of God’s purposes. At first Paul seems convinced that the vast majority of Jews will realize how much Jesus’ coming – His death and resurrection – fulfills all Messianic expectations: they will see how Jesus is the fulfillment of Judaism. This hope on Paul’s part will

nearly get him killed when he returns to Jerusalem, not long after writing this Ephesians epistle. Nevertheless, this hope, this mystery– this incredible Message of God’s love, and the unity and harmony it will bring to the whole world – is now very huge and very clear to Paul. We can only assume that this is why Paul is willing to go back to Jerusalem for one last time, and why he is still trying to speak the Message in the temple square to a vast crowd of Jews who are rioting and angry enough to kill him.

Paul seems to us to be ridiculous in his opinions and expectations in this moment. He should have known it was hopeless. He should have known that his behavior as a Christian apostle would make every non-Christian convert among the Jews livid with rage against him. Yet beyond all that, Paul knows and believes that the power and authority of the Risen Christ is even then sweeping across the world. The unity and harmony of the mystery of God’s true purpose is already at work in the world. What does it matter if he dies in his efforts to announce this mystery and purpose? What does it matter if one follower dies a few days or a few months early? The mystery of God’s purpose is what matters. Paul is so eager to see it unfolding – and so eager to be part of it – that it no longer matters to him what happens to him in this world.

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How is it that the mystery of God’s true plan for unity and harmony has been hidden for so long? Paul doesn’t think God ever tried to hide it, so how could it have been so obscure for so many ages? Are we willing to look at this?

What are the “ways of the world”? And how do they differ from the “Way of Christ”?

I do not believe that the ways of the world intend to be nasty or cruel. They just always end up that way. They do not intend to be cruel or evil. And often along the way they do very kind, caring, and even loving things. But sooner or later, because of their goals and purposes, the ways of the world are drawn into cruel and evil ways. What is Jesus’ comment? *“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* (Matthew 5:20) Lots of us, still operating out of the ways of the world, are very kind, compassionate, friendly, well-meaning people – until you threaten something or someone we care about. Then we are not so nice. Then, if the threat persists, we go to war.

Understandably, the ways of the world are focused on survival and success. What else seems important to the ways of the world? In his own language, Paul sometimes reminds us that we have all been there – that we have all come from this perspective and from this “place.” Most of us can even remember when we would have been angry and incensed toward anybody who suggested that we should not be striving for survival and success. Of course, this means survival and success as defined by our world, and according to the ways our world brings these items to us. Among other things, we often forget that neither survival nor success can last for very long here. We also tend to forget that even our own top heroes did not live for either of these goals. They all had something higher in mind – something beyond their own immediate best interests.

One of the side effects of being focused on survival and success in this world is the necessity of finding a group to be part of. A family, a business, a community, a nation. We survive better, if at all, with a so-called “like-minded” group around us. In the ways of the world, this automatically sets up the possibility of competition and conflict with other groups that we do not feel part of or care about (at least not nearly as much). In fact, in the ways of the world, other groups are easily seen as a threat or a danger. The more successful they are, the more threatened we tend to feel. So the conflict is always potentially moving toward animosity, anger, mistrust, even war. If our survival is threatened enough, the other groups trying to survive are seen to be expendable.

The worshippers of Baal under Jezebel saw the Yahwists of Israel as expendable. The Yahwists under Elijah saw the worshippers of Baal as expendable. The clash was inevitable, as long as the ways of the world were in effect. The numerous tribes in the Land of Canaan were seen as expendable by the Israelites who wanted a place to live according to the Covenant of Torah. Moses, in fact, concluded that it was God’s will that they be exterminated. How could God establish the Covenant, unless God also wanted them to “take out” all interference to *obeying* the Covenant?

I am merely reminding you that Paul was a rabbi – familiar with and steeped in Jewish traditions, history, and beliefs. All his life he would have been familiar with the “ways of the world” as they applied to surviving as a Jewish nation. He would have had no difficulty understanding why Elijah fought with Jezebel, and it would have been obvious to him that one side or the other must be driven from the land.

If, in Christ Jesus, Paul came to believe that God's higher plan was a world where all people lived in unity and harmony, that would have been beyond anything he had ever imagined or contemplated. It is beyond what most of us can contemplate even still. Seeing Jews and Gentiles living together in one congregation would already have seemed to Paul like an utter miracle. If the Gentiles were *converting* to Judaism, that was a different matter. That was a kind of unity that was understandable even in the ways of the world. But this was Jew and Gentile together in an unheard-of new configuration.

In our time, Christianity has been reconfigured to be just one more religion trying to succeed and survive according to the usual ways of the world. But that had not happened yet in Paul's time. The Holy Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic Church, all the sincere groups of Christians trying in the name of Christ to win the world into their particular institution or organization – that is no mystery. That is back to the ways of the world: Us against them. Everybody do it our way. If you don't come join us in our little band of love, you are going to hell.

But back to Paul: He is enthralled, elated, excited, and expectant beyond all words to describe it. Jesus is bringing unity and harmony to all the dimensions of Creation. He is breaking down the barriers of division and hatred everywhere. In Christ Jesus, all are seeing themselves as children of God – and with the new eyes of forgiven children. The old "rabbi" in Paul knows he has seen the veil lifted, and an entirely different truth (plan) of an entirely different magnitude is loose upon the earth.

So of course Paul trusts "the still, small voice" – which he now identifies as the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ. It has been continually guiding and helping him to move toward this great mystery that is out in the open and inviting everybody. His context has changed dramatically from the context of Elijah. He is not trying to kill Gentiles, or Romans, or the Jews who will not respond to his Message. He is not even trying to kill Christians anymore. Paul is enthralled with the mystery of God's true plan. And he is also enthralled with the authority and power of the Lord Christ, whom God has chosen as the agent to transform the world beyond all recognition.