

THE MYSTERY OF GOD

Part 10

Ephesians 3:1-12

Here in this text, Paul clearly connects the mystery of God with the gospel. Notice in verse 10, he calls it “the manifold wisdom of God,” which of course is the outworking of what in verse 11 he called, God’s “eternal purpose.” Also notice in verse 11, that Paul says, this was “*realized in Christ Jesus.*”

In the minds of many, both men and angels, the mystery of God as I have been talking about for the last two or three months created many questions. And as I suggested last week, even Satan himself and those hordes of angels who follow him, did not have the matter figured out either. I am convinced that what was “realized in Christ Jesus,” caught the devil off guard as much as anyone.

All of that being true, it would not be surprising then if we discover that the mystery of God also included things that flowed from the cross, and not merely those things that preceded the cross. I want to deal with one of those things, alluded to in the text we just read, and help you begin to see what is surely one of the greatest mysteries of all! I would like to speak to you about the church.

Now, when I speak about the church, I want to speak of it in the way God speaks of it in His word. Men have their own ideas and opinions about the church.

Some have rejected the idea of church altogether. These are the people who believe there is nothing to the claims of God. They do not believe in God, and they do not believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. They do not believe that this book, the Bible, is in any true sense of the word, the inspired Word of God. Having rejected all of these things out of hand, which they do to their own destruction by the way, they certainly have no use for or belief in the church.

Some understand the church to be, in some generalized way, made up of everyone who believes in God and makes a profession of faith in Christ. They accept the idea that people are going to see things differently and therefore they see the church that is talked about in the Bible as being made up from individuals from many denominations. In their mind, or at least in the mind of many of such people, the church is made up of Catholics, all kinds of so-called Protestants, and even some who belong to no organized church at all, but just have a private kind of faith to themselves. This idea of the church is at odds with what the Scriptures teach on a number of grounds, including Jesus’ own prayer for unity among those who believe in Him.

One of the popular understandings about the church today is that the church is a sort of substitute for the kingdom of God, which failed to come when Christ was rejected by the Jews and was put to death on the cross. People who hold this idea believe that Christ came to

establish God's kingdom, but was prevented from doing that, and so he quickly made provisions for the church to sort of maintain a divine presence on earth until Christ returns and sets up His kingdom on earth. This is the view of the church generally held by those who embrace a doctrine known as millennialism. Incidentally, the movie *Left Behind* with Nicolas Cage, is a Hollywood production based on millennialism. I am sure it is going to make an impression on many people, and scare some into turning to the Lord, but I believe a careful study of the scriptures will show you that the major components of millennialism are not taught in the Bible.

There are some, of course, who think of the church as a building or edifice in which people go to worship God.

The world and people think many things and have many ideas about the church, but where are the people who will stand up and declare, *"I don't care about any of that. Tell me what God has to say about it?"*

Interestingly, God's Word reveals to us that alongside of Christ dying on the cross, the church is likewise a key component of God's eternal plan. Jesus did not just come to die on the cross for my sins and yours, in the words of **Matthew 16:18, 19**, He came to build His church, which is also identified as His kingdom. *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19) I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."* Notice, Jesus said to Peter that upon the rock which was the confession Peter had just made, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, He was going to build His church, and he was giving Peter the keys to that church, or kingdom. Thus, the church is another name for the kingdom of heaven.

You will remember that a number of times prior to this, the message of John the Baptist, as well as the message preached by Jesus and his apostles was *"Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."* That is, the kingdom of heaven was soon to come, or be established. Well, what do we know about this kingdom? We know it was the subject of a number of Old Testament prophecies. In **Daniel 2:44**, for example, a kingdom would be set up which would never be destroyed. Daniel was speaking to the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar and giving him an inspired interpretation of a dream that had troubled the king. Various things that the king had seen in his dream were explained. Daniel said there was going to be four kingdoms. The Babylonian kingdom was one, the MedoPersian kingdom was the second. The Greek kingdom establish by Alexander the Great would be the third, and then the fourth kingdom would be a kingdom of many kings, which was the Roman kingdom. So, in 2:44, Daniel explained: *"And in the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever."* The coming of Christ and the establishing of the church, which is also identified as God's kingdom, fulfilled to the letter the prophecy found in Daniel.

There are numerous other prophecies that pointed to the establishing of the kingdom which was the church. In **Isaiah 9:6, 7** for example, we read,

6) *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7) Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.*

There can be little doubt that was a prophecy concerning the coming of Christ, the Prince of Peace. Notice that it says that He will establish his kingdom. So it was prophesied in the Old Testament, and there are literally dozens and dozens of prophecies that spoke about that. Thus, by the time of the beginning of Christ's ministry, the kingdom was spoken of as being at hand. It becomes clear then, that the kingdom is the church that Christ said he was going to build and the church is the kingdom to which Christ said Peter would be given the keys.

As we saw in Matthew 16:18, 19, Christ's building of His church/kingdom was still a future event. However, by the time we get into the book of Acts, which describes events following the death and resurrection of Christ, we read about the church being in existence.

- **Acts 5:11)** *And great fear came upon the whole church...*
- **Acts 8:1)** *And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem...*
- **Acts 8:3)** *But Saul was ravaging the church...*
- **Acts 9:31)** *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*
- **Acts 12:5)** *So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.*

So the church/kingdom that had been prophesied was established, but perhaps what many people have never appreciated is just exactly what the church is, and why the church is such a key part of the mystery of God.

Are you aware of the fact, and have you give it any serious thought that the scriptures describe the church as Christ's body? This was said a number of times. For example, turn to **Ephesians 1** and read with me beginning in **verse 15**:

15) For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, 16) I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17) that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, 18) having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19) and what is the

*immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20) that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21) far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22) And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to **the church, 23) which is his body**, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*

Ephesians 5:23) *For the husband is the head of the wife even as **Christ is the head of the church, his body**, and is himself its Savior.*

Colossians 1:18) *And he is the head of **the body, the church**. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*

Colossians 1:24) *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of **his body, that is, the church**,*

Now, think about that, what does that mean that the church is the body of Christ? What does it mean that WE are the body of Christ? Have you thought about that?

Do you remember what the Scriptures said about your becoming a member of the body, which is the church? Think about some things written by Paul in **1 Corinthians 12**. In **verse 27** of that chapter, he writes, *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."* Well, how did we get into the body? How did we become a part of the body? Look at **verse 13**. Paul says: *"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."* We were baptized, Paul says. When we were baptized, we were not just washed of our sins. Yes that's true, and I'm glad for that, but there's more to it than that. Our baptism not only resulted in our sins being washed away, but we were baptized into Christ's body, which is the church.

Now notice, **verse 12**. Paul says, *"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."*

"So it is with Christ!" Paul says. I hope you didn't miss that. I hope you caught that, and think about it. Paul didn't say, "So it is with the church." That's true, of course, but that isn't what he said. He said, *"So it is with Christ."* Christ has but one body. Yes, He's the head of the body, the only head, but we must also realize that He's the only body. That's why Ephesians 4:4 says there is "one body." Christ has but one body, and He is the one head of that one body. But is the head one thing and the body another? No, they are part of the same thing, aren't they. The same thing is true with us being the body of Christ. We have become one with Christ. In Romans 6:5, Paul says we have been united with Christ. We have been joined to him. What else in scripture is spoken of as being joined together? Husbands and wives, right? That's why Paul said there in **Ephesians 5:23**, *"For the husband is the head of the wife even as **Christ is the head of the church, his body**, and is himself its Savior."*

Are you getting the picture? In our obedience to Christ in being baptized into Him, we have become one with Him. In the same way Jesus said that a husband and wife are no longer two, but one flesh, we have become one with Him. We are in Him. So, being in Him, and being one with Him, that means that much of what can be said about Christ can be said for us. If He was triumphant over sin and death, in Him we are triumphant over sin and death. If He has eternal life, in Him we have eternal life. If He is at the right hand of God, in Him we are at the right hand of God!

Christ came to glorify God by being His servant. That is what we, the church of Christ today, must be as well. Our reason for being is to glorify God, and we do that in the same way that Jesus did when He walked among us. He was faithful and obedient to God in every way. That is our goal. We may not always succeed, but we keep that goal before us. Christ ministered to those in need and He committed Himself to seeking the lost. That is our agenda as well. We are to be ministers to those in need; we are to take advantage of every opportunity to help the lost find the salvation which is in Christ.

In **Ephesians 3:20, 21**, Paul wrote these words, and I will close with this:

*Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21) **to him be glory in the church** and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

The mystery of God is not something that happened a long time ago in a far-away place. It is something that continues to unfold even today, as the church continues to be the body of Christ and giving itself to bring glory to God. This church, each one of us are a part of that plan which began in the mind and heart of God before the heavens and earth were created. If long ago you could have looked into the mind of God to discover the great work that He was going to do, you would have seen many things. A creation, sin of course, people dying, a law being given, prophets foretelling of God's plan and calling men to holiness and faithfulness, you would have seen thousands of years passing by, and the coming of God's own son into the world. You would have seen a cross, and a resurrection, and you would have also seen a church—as the very body of Christ coming into its place, and hopefully, if you looked closely enough, you would even see yourself.

If however, you are not sure if you are a member of Christ's body, the church, we certainly do not want to close this service without giving each person the opportunity to make certain that they are.

Invitation