

Basic Training Bible Ministries

Taking the Enigma out of Paul's Mystery



"Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began, but now made manifest, and by the prophetic scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith ..."

Rom 16:25–26

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Note: This study should be examined in light of our previous conferences in Arkansas and Virginia. There will be some overlap of ideas, with the three conferences complementing one another. This study will supplement much-needed information.

Introduction

In addition to being styled "*an apostle to the Gentiles*" (Rom 11:13), Paul could also be called the apostle of the Mystery. This "*mystery*" contained new revelation intended for a new people, the Church, living in a new age or dispensation of God's plan.

Unfortunately, there has been widespread ignorance or confusion regarding the revelation and meaning of this "*mystery*," since the very beginning of the Church Age. This has resulted in much false teaching, but in particular two erroneous approaches to the New Testament:

- The first is an attempt to fit the new into the old, to somehow "spiritualize" any of the differences, in order to assume a continuity of plan and purpose. Jesus warned about this when He said that no one would "*put new wine into old wineskins*" without ruining both (Mat 9:17). Any attempt to make the Church a continuation of Israel is to destroy God's unique purpose for each, and to destroy both.
- Another popular method is to declare that—since Israel failed—God has replaced them with the Church. Thus, all God's promises to Israel now morph into spiritual promises for the Church. Again, this is due to ignorance of the body of teaching that was central to Paul's message and mission, which he called "*the mystery*."

When Paul was inspired to use this term, he was borrowing from a concept that had a long history in the ancient world. From 700 B.C., there had existed "mystery religions" (such as Dionysis, Cybele, Mythra, Isis, etc.) which were built on "secret" initiations and instructions for their followers. By these rites and instructions, the devotee was said to gain a "hidden wisdom" by which they were united to their god.

Along with this "privilege," there was imposed a very strict "vow of silence" concerning those who were "outside" regarding the contents of "the mystery." Many of these practices have been repeated in the "secret societies" of today.

Whenever Paul adapts any term from the ancient world and culture for biblical usage, he always imbues it with a new and higher meaning. In this way, he was able to speak in terms known to the people of his day, but to lead them away from the cosmic, to a spiritual concept of the word. Such was the case with words like "redemption, imputation, justification," etc. As we will see, the word "*mystery*" became central to Paul's teaching regarding the Church and its uniqueness in the plan of God and her place in history.

Taking the Enigma out of Paul's Mystery

I. Was Paul's Mystery Moses' Secret?

“Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began ...” Rom 16:25

The book of Romans is considered by almost all biblical scholars as Paul's *magnum opus*—his greatest theological work. However, all too often, even among scholars, the central point of Paul in this epistle is missed. There appears to be an enigma that is pervading Paul's teaching of the Mystery, even to this present day. It is the purpose of this study to eliminate that enigma.

A. The Mystery of Paul—Rom 16:25–27, Rom 11:25

As we will see later, Paul understands that the Mystery teaching (doctrine) was not conceived by him or arrived at by his own intellect or efforts. It was revealed to him in stages. This can be seen by comparing his references to it in his epistles, according to the time of their writing. For now, however, we will start with Romans to begin to “untie the knot” of the enigma and, therefore, expose the Mystery to clear view.

1. The Content of the Mystery—Rom 16:25–27

In Romans, Paul anticipates his later and fuller development of this doctrine in the books of Ephesians and Colossians. Here we see six facts in two categories:

- a. The boundaries/limitations of the Mystery (three “*according to*” statements):
 - i. The Mystery is contained within the gospel according to Paul.
 - ii. The Mystery is contained in new revelation never given before.
 - iii. The Mystery was revealed by direct command of the everlasting God.
- b. The benefits of knowing and acting on the Mystery:
 - i. The truth of the Mystery is available to all through the New Testament Scriptures.
 - ii. This knowledge is capable of providing spiritual stability to the believer in perilous times.
 - iii. The result intended by God is “*for obedience to the faith.*” This phrase is a key to Romans, and has specific, practical implications, as we will see.

2. The Intent of the Mystery—Rom 11:25

“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”

Since Paul concludes Romans with a reference to “*the mystery*” (Rom 16:25–27), we should look at the only other reference to this teaching in the book. We will look at this passage in greater detail later, but for now let’s take note of five factors regarding the Mystery:

- a. It is a body of truth that believers are ignorant of—to their own disadvantage.
- b. Ignorance of the Mystery leads inevitably to spiritual arrogance and incompetence.
- c. The Mystery explains the spiritual blindness of Israel during the Church Age.
- d. The doctrine of the Mystery relates to the dispensation of the Church Age.
- e. This teaching also explains the necessity of the removal of the Church in order to facilitate the future “engrafting” and restoration of the nation of Israel.

B. The “Secret” of Moses—Deu 29:29

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

1. In this passage, Moses makes a statement that has often been misused and abused by Bible teachers. Often, when a particular teaching is challenged because it defies the clear statements of Scripture, the teacher will respond with this text—as if it might somehow excuse the inconsistency of their teachings.

However, the laws of biblical interpretation still apply, even to obscure passages. In fact, if we will simply follow the principles of “hermeneutics” (biblical interpretation), we can remove much of the “difficulty” from difficult passages. That is to say that proper interpretation “unties the knots” and removes the enigmas. This passage is filled with vital spiritual truths relating to Israel, according to Old Testament revelation. Consider the following:

- a. In the **context** (Deu 29:1–28), Moses is reviewing “*the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel ...*” (Deu 29:1).
 - b. This solemn review is intended that Israel might know their God (Deu 29:6) and enter into His covenant (Deu 29:12), that God might establish Israel as His people (Deu 29:13) since His covenant was made alone with Israel (Deu 29:14).
 - c. However, God revealed that, in coming generations, Israel would forsake Him—falling into idolatry, resulting in their expulsion from the land (Deu 29:18–23).
 - d. This would result in the nations questioning why God had cursed their land and cast them out of it (Deu 29:24–28).
2. The obvious question that would arise in the minds of those present on that day would be, “how could such a thing occur?” and then, “how could God fulfill His

promises to Israel?” Moses, like any good teacher, anticipates the question. His answer is in Deu 29:29. In this verse are found four great truths for Israel:

- a. There are things not yet revealed because they do not belong to Israel.
- b. God had revealed to the nation of Israel all it needed to know and follow at that time.
- c. These truths are revealed “*to us and to our children forever*”; they are “*irrevocable*” and eternal (cf., Rom. 11:29).
- d. These covenant truths have been revealed to Israel “*that we may do all the words of this law.*”

The implication is that there is future truth, yet hidden, for others to know and do!

II. The Essence of the Enigma

Now we come to the “enigma” in the Mystery teaching of Paul. What was rightfully an enigma to ancient Israel ought not to be an enigma to the Church-Age believer. Unfortunately, it remains so for the vast majority of believers today. This ignorance of which Paul warned is inexcusable—in light of the truth we have and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

To begin with, when we speak of an “enigma,” we are talking about something that may be rightly understood but, because of some hindrance in the hearer, cannot be explained. The Webster definition of enigma is: “*something hard to define or understand fully, an obscure saying, a riddle, (something) veiled in meaning.*” A riddle is only a riddle when you lack either the information, or proper perspective, to explain it. Therefore, the enigma exists due to a lack of understanding within the listener.

A. The Perplexity of the Prophets—1Pe 1:10–12

“Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully ... searching ... what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow ...”

Peter tells us here that after receiving revelation from God, the prophets of the Old Testament would sit down and diligently search to understand things that were not clear to them. Their enigma revolved around three unresolved issues:

1. The Messiah, the Christ, would come and suffer and die.
2. His death would provide redemption and pave the way for an age of glory.
3. How could these events be reconciled? Specifically, “*what manner of time*” would intervene between the two events?

To quote from the Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament regarding the phrase “*what manner of time,*” it says, “*the indefinite pronoun suggests a definite period, almost a date to be fixed, while this word (poios) suggests the general outward circumstances to be expected.*” (p. 746). To put this into modern vernacular, “what will be the kind of dispensation that will exist between the two main events of Christ’s crucifixion and His future kingdom?”

The only answer they were given, according to Peter, was that “*not to themselves, but to us ... things which now have been reported [revealed] ... things which angels desire to look into*” (1Pe 1:12). The divine response to the prophets of old might be summarized in four points:

1. The answer to their dilemma did not relate to them (Israel) but to us (Church).
2. The resolution of the enigma required future revelation, not given to them.
3. This new revelation would be given to a people other than “*themselves.*”

4. This revelation would explain “*what manner of time*” would intervene between Christ’s crucifixion and His crowning with glory and honor in His kingdom.

B. The Removal of “Enigmas”—Dan 5:12, Dan 5:16

“Inasmuch as an excellent spirit, knowledge, understanding, interpreting dreams, solving riddles, and explaining enigmas were found in this Daniel ... that you can give interpretations and explain enigmas ...”

1. In the New King James translation of this passage, the word “*enigmas*” is used for the Hebrew word *chiydah*, meaning “a riddle, perplexing or dark saying.” This comes from the root word *chuw*, which means “to tie a knot.” Thus, the interpretation is called “*untying the knot.*” In other words, Daniel had the ability to take the enigma out of what was—for Belshazzar the king—a hidden mystery.
2. In the story of the “writing on the wall,” God sent a message of His impending judgment on the kingdom of Belshazzar. The meaning of the message, however, was hidden from the king, apart from Daniel’s interpretation. In this way, God showed the difference between those “in the dark,” and his servant, who was walking “*in the light.*” Daniel was shown to be “*a man ... in whom ... the spirit of the Holy God*” resided (Dan 5:11). Every Church-Age believer today should be such a servant. Unfortunately, what has been revealed and should be known remains an enigma for far too many!
3. The warning of Paul against ignorance of the Mystery revealed to him (Rom 11:25; 1Th 4:13) has gone unheeded by many today. Because of the failure of pastors to diligently study and teach, and the failure of individual believers to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives, what should be foundational to our faith has become an enigma. Of such spiritual apathy four things may be said:
 - a. Once revelation is given, ignorance of it is inexcusable (Joh 15:22; Rom 10:3).
 - b. This ignorance is both willful and culpable (1Co 14:37–38; 2Pe 3:5).
 - c. Willing ignorance of revealed truth leads to accepting the lie (Rom 10:3).
 - d. One is blinded to the truth and therefore enslaved to the enigma, as a result of continued rejection of and hardening to the truth (Dan 5:22–23; Eph 4:17–18).
4. Daniel removed the “enigma” of the writing on the wall because he had spiritual insight, given by the Spirit of God. It was not the words that Belshazzar could not understand. The words were in Aramaic, his native tongue. What he lacked was the meaning of the words, because (1) he did not see them as a message from the Living God, and (2) he lacked a spiritual frame of reference for that message. The words were “*numbered ... weighed ... divided*” (Dan 5:26–28)—the last word a play on the word “Persian.”

C. Why Does the Enigma Remain?

Since the Mystery revealed to Paul was no longer to be hidden, but rather “*made known*” openly (Eph 1:9, Eph 3:3) and something of which the believer should not be “*ignorant*” (Rom 11:25; 1Th 4:13; 2Th 2:1–3). Why then does the enigma continue? It is precisely because Church-Age believers—members of the Body of Christ—priests after “*the order of Melchizedek*” (Heb 7:12), remain in an inexcusable state of spiritual ignorance regarding our standing before God (Col 3:1–4), and of the mighty power of our ministry of intercession before the Throne of God (Heb 4:16). Following are five reasons which help to explain this continuing ignorance:

1. Satan and his forces fear the power vested in the Church. Never before has a human priesthood been personally indwelt by the Spirit of God, and a High Priest seated at the right hand of God, wherein the Spirit-led prayers of this company are personally brought before the Father by both the Spirit and the Son (Rom 8:26, Rom 8:34). In Dan 10:1–21, we see how the prayers of Daniel were working together with Michael and his angelic armies in Heaven, as they fought against demonic forces controlling the nations. Imagine having millions of believers all over this earth, who have greater potential than even one as great as Daniel! Therefore, Satan and his minions work ceaselessly to promote what follows in the next four conditions.
2. Pastors, whose primary task before God is to study and teach God’s Word (2Ti 2:15, 2Ti 3:16–17, 2Ti 4:1–3), have been lured away from their spiritual responsibilities by churches becoming businesses, over which the pastor is just a manager. The focus is growing the congregation at all costs, in order to pay the bills. Thus, entertainment and “feel good” worship services have taken the place of the steady and sound teaching of the Word of God. The proclamation of the truth has never been popular, and is even less so now. Not only does “*the truth* [set you] *free*” (Joh 8:32), but in many cases it makes people mad. There is a cost that comes with serious dedication to sound doctrine.
3. Not only pastors, but the vast majority of present-day believers do not want to expend the spiritual energy and dedication to endure in-depth Bible study (2Ti 4:3–4), much less develop a dedicated prayer ministry of intercession for other believers to “wake up” (Eph 5:14), and for the lost to come under the powerful convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit (Joh 16:7–11) that they might come to Christ in faith. Superficial sermonettes are all that is required, and the clock is watched to see that the pastor does not surpass his allotted 15 minutes! Any suggestion that each and every believer is accountable to have a spiritual impact on not only their immediate sphere of influence, but by prayer to have an effect on history, is passed off as grandiose flights of religious fancy.
4. Prayer has been dumbed down until the totality of the average prayer life today is a “grocery list” of what we want God to do for us. We seldom spend the time or

focus necessary to enter into the Holy of Holies (Heb 4:16) for the purpose of selfless, intercessory prayer on behalf of others.

Note: The only prayer we have recorded by Paul for himself was not answered (2Co 12:7–10). In fact, the only prayer that our Lord prayed for Himself was not answered (Mat 26:39, Mat 26:42, Mat 26: 44), except that He prevailed by adding, “not My will but Thy will be done.”

5. We have truly entered into the “Laodicean Age” (Rev 3:14–22) where materialism has taken the place of “*lay[ing] up ... treasures in heaven*” (Mat 6:19–21). Our “*lukewarm*” spirituality has no place for a fiery passion for Jesus Christ to truly reign in our lives by His grace (Rom 5:17, Rom 5:21). We have more concern over fitting in and what others think of us, and have allowed “political correctness” to permeate our minds and our churches. There is widespread lack of discernment to “separate the precious from the worthless” (Jer 15:19; Eze 22:26). The disruptive demands of persistent spiritual growth through diligent study of God’s Word have been deemed too stringent, and we have chosen to take the “easy path”—to our own shame!

III. Jesus Introduces both Mystery and Enigma—Mat 13:10–17

“Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.” Mat 13:11

In this one verse, we have “*mysteries*” and “enigmas.” Remember that in biblical usage, “mystery” (the Greek word *musterion* does not mean something that cannot be known). Of the three possible usages of the term, we must be sure to take the New Testament meaning.

- The ancient classical meaning:
According to this use, the “mysteries” were secret rites and instructions given to select initiates who were seeking to be united and identified with their god. These secret rites were forbidden to be divulged to those outside the cult.
- The “modern” meaning:
Largely because of the proliferation of a certain genre of novels, the idea of “a mystery” involves some crime to be solved by ferreting out all the “clues” and arranging them in order to solve the crime. Paul is not using mystery in this sense.
- The biblical/New Testament meaning:
In this sense, we speak of things revealed by God for the Church during the span of the Church Age, by which the Church may fulfill the divine will for her in this present dispensation, and understand how God will bring about things to come. This knowledge is not to be kept secret, but to be proclaimed to the world.

A. Jesus’ Presentation of the Mystery

Since the Mystery revealed to Paul was “*kept secret since the world began*” (Rom 16:25), these teachings cannot be found in the Old Testament. This is why, when Jesus began to reveal “new things,” He was accused (by the religious leaders) of being a heretic. His “*new wine*” could not fit in their “*old wineskins*” (Mat 9:17).

Jesus was the first to reveal the existence of the “mystery doctrines” (Mat 13:11; Mar 4:11; Luk 8:10). In each case, they related to the “kingdom of heaven parables,” which were designed to reveal new truths to His disciples (Mat 13:11; Luk 8:10), but to conceal them from the unmotivated and unenlightened masses.

“that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.” Mat 13:13

If we study the Kingdom of Heaven parables of Matthew 13, we find that in each one a new truth is being revealed, yet in a manner that did not “fit” with the expectations of His generation. Rather than fulfilling their expectations that Messiah would come in and establish His eternal kingdom, Jesus showed that there would be an extended period of time during which “*the kingdom of heaven*” would work quietly and powerfully on the earth in the midst of unbelief, violence, and evil. But in the end,

“*the kingdom of heaven*” would prevail. Here are some of the truths that were in opposition to the rabbinical teachings of His day:

1. Parable of the Sower: In spite of the inherent power in the seed, its fruition would depend upon the condition of the soil (Mat 13:3–9). This was contrary to the prevailing teaching of the deterministic sovereignty of God (similar to the extreme Calvinism of our day).
2. Purpose of the Parables: Those who are often most blind are those who profess that they can see (Mat 13:11–17, with Joh 9:41, Joh 15:22). These parables—and later Paul’s Mystery—are so designed that the arrogance of man is humbled by them. They can be known, not by intellect or education, but only by revelation from the Spirit of God to the humble soul.
3. Parable of the Wheat and Tare: Both the existence of—and the battle between—good and evil, will rage until the final harvest at the end of the age (Armageddon) (Mat 13:24–30). As Paul said, “*the mystery of lawlessness is already at work*” (2Th 2:7). But at the very time when Satan’s evil plan seems about to prevail, the “*good seed*” will triumph.
4. Parable of the Mustard Seed: The insignificance of the kingdom of faith will belie its final triumphant appearance (Mat 13:31–32). “*The kingdom of God does not come with observation*” (Luk 17:20). I take the part about “*the birds of the air come and nest in its branches*” (Mat 13:32) as Jesus’ use of Dan 4:21—but in a greater spiritual sense.
5. Parable of the Leaven: The Kingdom of Heaven is compared to the permeating power of leaven, and it will, in time, gain power over the entire earth (Mat 13:33). Note: While leaven is used in Scripture as a figure of evil (1Co 5:6–8), that does not appear to be the case here. Rather, the parallel seems to be—as with the mustard seed—its power to grow, specifically over a prolonged period of time (the Church Age).
6. Parable of the Hidden Treasure: The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure, either hidden from sight, or extremely rare (Mat 13:44–46), which some find almost “*accidentally,*” while others come to it after a long and diligent search.
7. Parable of the Dragnet: Lastly, the Kingdom of Heaven will require a final separation of the “*good*” from the “*bad,*” that is, the believer from the unbeliever (Mat 13:47–50). This will not occur until the Second Advent (Mat 24:31, Mat 24:40–41; Mat 25:31–33).

B. Jesus Reveals Moses’ Secrets—Mat 13:35

“I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret since the foundation of the world.”

1. In this verse, which Jesus uses to explain the Kingdom of Heaven parables, He quotes Psa 78:2. Here, Asaph, the writer who was both a Levite (1Ch 6:39) and a prophet/singer (2Ch 29:30; Neh 12:46), built on the words of Moses (Deu 29:29) and looked forward to Messiah, as the One who would bring the new revelation to light.

2. The true meaning of Jesus' "*mysteries of the kingdom of heaven*" (Mat 13:11) was never fully understood by the disciples, though they claimed to comprehend them (Mat 13:51). It would not be until Paul received the revelation that the Mystery would be seen in its fullness. Only then, and only to those who understood Paul's teaching, would "*every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven [be] like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old*" (Mat 13:52).
3. Because what Paul calls "*my gospel*" (Rom 16:25) was new, even to the original disciples, he was concerned lest they might reject it, and as he said, "*lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain*" (Gal 2:2). The fear was not in whether his message was true, but in whether the other eminent apostles (Peter, James, John) might reject his gospel of grace, infused with the content of the Mystery and shorn of any subservience to Israel or the Law. This was the "*new wine*" that could not fit into their "*old wineskins,*" (Mat 9:17) and they had difficulty accepting this, as the confrontation between Paul and Peter (Gal 2:11–16) makes clear.
4. The early Church—the masterpiece of Jesus Christ (Mat 16:18)—was not a perpetuation of Israel, nor did Israel morph into the Church. In the Church, we have an entirely "*new creation*" (2Co 5:17). It is the work of this "*new creation,*" during the time allotted to us in this age, to prepare the way for the future redemption and reconciliation of Israel. Only then will "*the mystery of God ... be finished*" (Rev 10:7).

IV. The Gradual Revelation of the Mystery to Paul

*“If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God ...
the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known ...”*

Eph 3:2, Eph 3:4–5

As we peruse the epistles of Paul, according to the time of the writing of each, we find that his understanding of the Mystery developed over time. The concept must have been introduced to him during his initial three years in the desert (Gal 2:17–18). No doubt he spent much time in prayer and meditation, seeking clarity regarding this vital truth. As we look at this development, we will also come to see what the essence of this “*the mystery*” is.

A. First Mention of the Mystery—2Th 2:7

*“For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who
now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way.”*

The Thessalonian epistles were written very early, probably around 50–51 A.D. It is here we find Paul’s first use of the word “*mystery*.” It is in a negative sense, yet it highlights a very great positive, which Paul had already taught the Thessalonians. In accord with the prophecy of Daniel (Dan 9:26–27), Satan was at work to bring his own incarnation into the world in the form of Antichrist. This would occur in the “*time of Jacob’s trouble*” (Jer 30:7), which we know as the Tribulation. These Thessalonian believers had been misled by false teaching—purported to be from Paul (2Th 2:2)—that “*the day*” had come. He comforts them by reminding them of his teaching on the Rapture (cf., 2Th 2:1 with 1Th 4:13–18), and the fact that “**the departure**” must come first. Note: This is the proper translation of “*falling away*,” 2Th 2:3, where the use of the definite article is pointing to 2Th 2:1 and our “*gathering together to Him*.”

In this passage we see that “*the mystery*” is referring to specific revelation, relevant to the culmination of God’s plan. The “*how*” and “*why*” that the Old Testament prophets could not figure out is explained by this doctrine. The coming of Antichrist is the culmination of the “*good*” versus “*bad*” seed in Jesus’ parables.

B. Further Development—1 Corinthians (55 A.D.)

The word “*mystery*” is used five times in First Corinthians, each adding to our insight into what the teaching of the Mystery entailed. With the five passages, we will make five crucial points.

1. The “*mystery*” reveals the wisdom of God for Church-Age believers (1Co 2:7):
 - a. It is wisdom that only “*mature*” believers will understand (1Co 2:6).
 - b. It is the same “*wisdom*” which was hidden “*before the ages*” (1Co 2:7).
 - c. It is specifically for us, the Church, “*for our [future] glory*” (1Co 2:7b).

- d. It is revealed only by the “*Spirit of God*,” and must be taught (1Co 2:10–13).
 - e. It can only be received by those who are spiritual (1Co 2:14–3:3).
2. Paul, and other teachers (cf., 1Co 3:22), were “*stewards*” of God’s mysteries (1Co 4:1–2):
 - a. The word “steward” refers to the chief servant in a household (cf., Gen 15:2). The word is from *oikos* (house), and *nomos* (law). The steward was to administer the “law of the household.” Since the Church is a different household than Israel (cf., Heb 3:1–6), there is a new “law or rule” for that household, which had been kept hidden until the formation of the Church at Pentecost. Both “*steward*” and “dispensation” come from the same root word. This will be seen in Ephesians 3.
 - b. The plural use “*mysteries*” refers to all the elements contained in the Mystery doctrine. These speak of the many facets of the one great truth. Paul was faithfully administering the truth revealed to him, which the Corinthians were rejecting in their carnality. Some things never change!
 3. It is not just the understanding, but the motive in applying these truths that counts above all (1Co 13:2). This is a continuation of “*he who is spiritual*” (1Co 2:15). Apart from the love produced by the Spirit (Gal 5:22), all knowledge is superficial (1Co 8:1). It does not follow, however, that all we need do is be loving and it doesn’t matter if we know very much. Those led by the Spirit will seek the truth of the Spirit!

Note: The understanding of the Mystery Doctrine calls us to action, because it reveals to us a vital function we have in the plan and purpose of God. But the only way for truth to become action is by “*faith working through love*” (Gal 5:6b).

4. The original use of the gift of tongues was a means to reveal the Mystery teachings, before they were recorded in writing (1Co 14:2). In short, tongues was intended to be a revelation gift, just like the gifts of prophecy and knowledge (1Co 13:8). It was for this reason that Paul forbade the public use of the gift without an interpreter (1Co 14:26–33).
 5. The Mystery reveals the means of the resurrection of the Church-Age believer (1Co 15:51). Reading the context of 1Co 15:50–58, we can see that it reinforces and complements the Rapture teaching in 1Th 4:13–18. Again, the “*we*” of whom Paul speaks can only refer to those who are “*in Christ*”—that is Church-Age believers.
- C. The Relationship of the Mystery to Israel—Rom 11:25, Rom 16:25 (57–58 A.D.)

Our theme text has already been introduced and will come up again for much further and deeper study. It is worth noting here that while the “mystery doctrine” is primarily for the Church, it deals with the Church in its relationship to Israel! During

the time of Israel's divinely imposed blindness, the Church has a role to play with a view toward Israel's restoration.

D. The Final Development—Colossians/Ephesians (61 A.D.)

In these epistles, particularly in Ephesians, Paul comes to his fullest treatment of the subject. They are called “sister epistles” with good reason. In Colossians, Christ is seen as “*Head of the Body*” (Col 1:18, Col 2:10, Col 2:19) whereas in Ephesians, the Church is seen as “*the Body of Christ*” (Eph 1:23, Eph 2:16, Eph 3:6, Eph 4:4, Eph 4:12, Eph 4:16, Eph 5:23, Eph 5:30). This important truth means that what is true of the Head is true of the Body. We can best look at this final development in three segments:

1. The Mystery of Divine Indwelling—Col 1:26–27

The indwelling presence of Christ is the key to all promised blessings. Since this mystery had “*been hidden from ages and from generations,*” it is obvious that this indwelling is new to the Church-Age believer. Of this, three things must be pointed out:

- a. Paul was chosen by God to administer the “*stewardship,*” or the “*law of the household,*” to the Church (Col 1:25). In his writing alone do we find the truth of the revelation of the Mystery Doctrine.
- b. It was because of this revelation to Paul that he suffered as he did (Col 1:24). As we see in 2Co 12:7, it was because of the “*abundance of revelations*” he received that he endured the “*thorn in the flesh,*” and all the onslaught of Satan. These truths are precious and priceless, and come at the price of blood—not only of Christ, but of all His servants.
- c. This doctrine is a call to maturity and mighty actions (Col 1:28–29). The word “*striving*” is *agonizomai*, and speaks of intense and active endurance in order to win the prize. Remember that “*the hope of glory*” (Col 1:27) from the standpoint of eternal reward, is only fulfilled by “*labor, striving ... His working ... in me*” (Col 1:29).

Note: The indwelling is not an end in itself. It is for the purpose of providing supernatural power for active spiritual service.

2. The Mystery of “*the Fullness of Times*”—Eph 1:9–12

Repeatedly in this context, Paul declares that the mystery was revealed in order to fulfill the “*will ... good pleasure ... purpose ... counsel ...*” of God. What is the divine purpose revealed in the teaching of the mystery?

- a. It pertains to “*the dispensation of the fullness of times*” (Eph 1:10). This is the same “*fullness*” of which Paul spoke in Rom 11:25, “*until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.*” It refers to what we commonly call the dispensation of the Church Age—stretching from Pentecost to the Rapture of the Church.

- b. It pertains to an *“inheritance ... predestined”* for those living in this age (Eph 1:11). Whereas the inheritance of Israel is that of an earthly kingdom in the land of Israel, the kingdom of the Church-Age believer is a heavenly kingdom (Phi 3:20; Col 3:1–4; Heb 13:28).
- c. It pertains to the potential for every believer to be *“to the praise of His glory”* (Eph 1:12). How well or how poorly we will do this is the subject of most of Paul’s warnings and exhortations. While all believers will bring glory in some way, some will excel, while others will not. To the degree that we bring Him honor and glory, we will, in turn, be rewarded accordingly (1Co.9:24–27; 2Ti 4:8; Jam 1:12; Rev 3:11).

It becomes quite clear—as we follow the line of Paul’s thought regarding the Mystery teaching, which was revealed to him—that it has great significance both for our lives and pursuits here and now, and for our eternal state. Having said this, it is worth the warning that we should never equate eternal rewards with eternal salvation. Our salvation is secure because of the work of Christ alone, and our faith in Him. There is nothing that can threaten our eternal security!

3. The Mystery of a Heavenly Priesthood—Eph 3:1–13

In this extended passage, it is easy to get lost in the verbiage. In this whole passage, we have only two sentences in the Greek. Since verse one actually connects with verse 14, we’ll look at the main point of the two sentences:

- a. The gift, power, and ministry of Paul—Eph 3:2–7

“I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.” Eph 3:7

Take note of the emphasis Paul places on his faithfulness to the call of God for his life:

- *“the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you”* (Eph 3:2)
- *“by revelation He made known to me the mystery ...”* (Eph 3:2)
- *“now ... revealed by [His] Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets ...”* (Eph 3:5)
- *“of which I became a minister according to the gift of God’s grace ...”* (Eph 3:7)

Application: It is worth keeping in mind, when Paul speaks of his ministry—empowered and made effective by the inner working of the indwelling Spirit—that he is following up from Col 1:26–27. The *“mystery”* of God’s indwelling by His Spirit was a call to action, and came with great responsibility. Further, he was called by God to become an example—Exhibit A—to Church-Age believers of what God could do through them (1Co 11:1; Phi 3:17; 1Ti 1:16).

The question is how well have we followed in his footsteps?

The focus of Paul's ministry was to reveal, teach, and exhibit in life the meaning of this mystery, so *"that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel."*

b. "Force-Multiplication" Through the Body—Eph 3:8–13

"... to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places ..." Eph 3:10

The idea of "force multiplication" is a military concept. It deals with the means of taking given forces and "multiplying" their power through superior strategy, tactics, speed, maneuver, and surprise.

Paul thought like a Centurion or a military commander. Being engaged in a universal spiritual struggle, his goal was to carry out the "mission-intent" of His Commander, the Lord Jesus Christ, and bring ultimate defeat to His enemies. He must therefore marshal his forces to both know and do His will, as revealed by the revelation of the Mystery, which we might call here "the mystery-strategy."

This "mystery-strategy" was never revealed before being introduced by Christ Himself, and then fully expounded by Paul. It was "mission orders" for the Church only. Paul first exemplified the plan, then passed it on to members of the Body of Christ. In essence, his message was ... "Do as I have done, and you will have the power and effectiveness that I have had, to the glory of Jesus Christ." Listed below are the components of this strategy.

c. The Tactics of Spiritual Force Multiplication—Eph 3:8–13

- i. God's strategy is designed for the smallest, weakest, least-likely believer (Eph 3:8a). Repeatedly, Paul makes this point (1Co 15:9–10; 2Co 12:7–10; 1Ti 1:14–17). I have often been asked this question over the years, "What you teach is great for highly gifted believers, but what about us common folks. What can we do?" My answer is always, "If you would believe in what the power of God could do in your life, you would see" (Joh 11:40)! God is glorified when He takes the small and the weak and wins mighty victories through them. Isn't this what the entire Old Testament record teaches us?

- (a) Consider Abraham (Gen 14:14),
- (b) Consider Gideon (Jdg 8:1–35),
- (c) Consider Rahab (Jos 2:1–24), or
- (d) Consider Jael (Jdg 4:21)

Principle: Each and every believer in the Body of Christ has exactly the same spiritual provisions as the Apostle Paul! This is his point in the text!

- ii. The Master's riches have been bestowed for the Master's purpose (Eph 3:8b). Infinite spiritual riches (Eph 1:3, Eph 1:7, Eph 1:18; Eph 2:7, Eph 3:8, Eph 3:16) have been entrusted to every Church-Age believer, and to what end? Why did the master in the parable of the talents give resources to his servants (Mat 25:14–30)? They were to be used to enrich His household! In our case, they are intended for a mighty spiritual victory!
- iii. These riches and powers have been reserved for a special people in a specific time in the unfolding of God's plan (Eph 3:9). The phrase "*fellowship of the mystery*" should be translated "dispensation of the mystery," as it is the same word used in Eph 1:10 and Eph 3:2. Remember that it comes from a compound word meaning "the administration of the law of the household." It was purposely "*hidden*" (Deu 29:29) from men and angels, until the time of execution.
- iv. The divine purpose for the revelation of the Mystery to the Church is that God's wisdom might be displayed through the Church to hostile angelic powers (Eph 3:10. cf., Eph 6:12). What is the essence of that wisdom? Paul gives a concise summary of it in 1Co 1:18–31. In summary, it is that God has chosen to use the weak to defeat the mighty, and the foolish to defeat the wise—through faith in Christ.

Note: Believers who complain that they are too weak or foolish to be used by God are defying His plan in arrogance and unbelief!

- v. The means by which this spiritual victory is to be attained, is by giving to mortal men (believers) something the highest angel does not have—open access to the Throne of Grace and the right to ask and intercede with unlimited power! (Eph 3:11–13)

Principle: Paul continues this thought in the "*armor of God*" section (Eph 6:10–17), where the whole purpose of putting on the armor is for the purpose of intercessory prayer (Eph 6:18–20).

We have now come to the crux of this study, which is the necessity of understanding the priesthood "*according to the order of Melchizedek.*"

V. The Mystery and Melchizedek

“The Lord has sworn and will not relent, You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Heb 7:21

According to Paul in the Ephesian epistle, the Body shares everything with the Head. Or, as John says, *“As He is so are we in this world”* (1Jo 4:17). No doubt John learned this from Paul, and it is a mighty statement. If only we believed it!

A. The Appearance of Melchizedek—Gen 14:18–20

These three verses are all we know of this mysterious figure in Old Testament history. However, we can gain some great insight by carefully examining this record. Here are seven things we discover:

1. His name literally means “King of righteousness,” and he is king of ancient Salem (Jerusalem, see Psa 76:2). *“Melchizedek”* is similar to “Adonizedek” (“Lord of righteousness, Jos 10:1), a later king who may have styled his name after the famous “prophet, priest, warrior, king.” (In Adonizedek we see no faith at all!)
2. He is a Gentile *“priest of God Most High”* (El Elyon).
3. He is known to Abram, and Abram is known to him. Is it possible that he was Abram’s teacher, when he camped at *“the terebinth tree of Moreh”* (meaning “the teacher/seer”) (Gen 12:6).
4. He brought to Abram *“bread and wine”*—the first appearance of these elements, which would later be used in the Passover and in the Lord’s Supper. These elements point to Jesus Christ.
5. He gave Abram a blessing from God, *“possessor of heaven and earth.”* Might this be related to the fact that the seed of Abram will be *“as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore”* (Gen 22:17)?
6. He praised God, who had delivered Abram’s enemies into his hand. Was Melchizedek interceding for Abram during the battle? (Perhaps while Abram was fighting, Melchizedek was praying!)
7. His appearance was just in time to cut off the king of Sodom, and to help Abram maintain spiritual focus.

B. Some Applications from Melchizedek

1. The Old Testament concept of a priest is far different than what we think of today. We think of someone who dresses funny, is mild and sweet, and would not hurt a fly.
2. In the ancient concept of priesthood, we actually have a mighty figure, who combined four different characteristics:
 - a. Warrior—Phinehas (Num 25:6–8); Benaiah (2Sa 23:20–23; 1Ch 16:6)
 - b. Prophet—Jeremiah (Jer 1:1)
 - c. Priest/Teacher—Ezra (Ezr 7:6, Ezr 7:10–11, Ezr 7:25)
 - d. King—Melchizedek (Gen 14:18–20)

3. These four qualities were very likely combined in Melchizedek, who probably won Jerusalem by warfare, and was likely Abram's early teacher.
4. All four qualities are combined in the New Testament priesthood after the order of Melchizedek:
 - a. The Church-Age believer is to be a spiritual warrior (Rom 13:11–14; 2Co 10:3–5; Eph.6:10–18).
 - b. Every believer in Christ is to be a “prophet/teacher” in the sense of proclaiming the Word of God (Mat 28:18–20; 2Co 5:14–21; 1Th 1:6–10).
 - c. Each of us is a priest, under the high Priesthood of Christ (1Pe 2:5–9).
 - d. We are also a Royal Family, and one day will reign with Him, to the degree of our faithfulness here and now (Rom 5:17, Rom 5:21; 2Ti 2:12; Rev 5:10).

From these bare facts we must now turn to an inspired interpretation of the text.

C. The Interpretation of Melchizedek—Hebrews 5 and 7

We turn to the book of Hebrews, a book shrouded in its own mystery. I am more and more inclined to believe two things about this book:

1. First, that it was written by dictation from Paul, who did not sign it due to the hostility of many Jewish believers against him. I believe the author, or writer, was Luke. As someone said, “The thoughts are Paul’s but the writing is that of Luke.” Note: The Chester Beatty Papyri, acquired in 1930, contains all of Paul’s epistles, and includes the book of Hebrews.
2. Second, that this book will become a major text book for the 144,000 Jewish evangelists of the early Tribulation period (Rev 7:1–8). These are matters of opinion, not of Scripture.

D. The High-Priesthood of Christ—Heb 5:1–10

1. In Heb 5:1–4, we have the standard for a typical high priest, e.g., Aaron:
 - a. He is chosen from among men, but called by God.
 - b. He is appointed to represent men before God, to represent them through offerings in regard to their sins.
 - c. He is able to be compassionate, because of his own weaknesses.
 - d. He offers sacrifices both for the people and for himself.
 - e. He does not assume this position, but is chosen by God.

These are the standards that prevailed in the Levitical priesthood.

2. In Heb 5:5–10, we now see a new High Priest, anticipated by Old Testament Scripture:
 - a. Jesus Christ (a man) did not appoint Himself (Heb 5:5–6), but was appointed by God in Psa 110:4—a thousand years before He came into the world. And the time of that appointment, as given in Psa 2:7, was at the resurrection (cf.,

Act 2:34–35, where Peter quotes Psa 110:4 as following the resurrection; and Act 13:33, where Paul quotes Psa 2:7 as following the resurrection).

- b. His ability to have compassion came not from his own sinfulness, but from His sufferings, prayers, and reverence (Heb 5:7–8). As a man, “*He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.*”
- c. By His sufferings, this sinless Man “*having been perfected,*” was declared by God to be “*High Priest*” of a new order, that “*of Melchizedek.*” The idea of “being perfected” means He was brought to the point of understanding sinners, since He endured every form of temptation (cf., Heb 2:18, Heb 4:15). Having no sin of His own, the Son of God had to endure extreme temptations—far beyond any normal man, in order to understand sinners.

Such is the record of the high priesthood of our Lord, in which we share. It is worth noting that the word “*order*” in Heb 5:6 means “a division, or succession,” therefore denoting a priesthood under the High Priest (cf., 1Pe 2:5).

E. The Priesthood After the Order of Melchizedek—Heb 7:1–10

If we accept the full implications of what it means to be “in Christ,” and to act as His Body on this earth, carrying out the will of Christ our Head, then we can use this passage to learn the nature of His high priesthood, and of our own priestly service:

1. This priesthood is built first on righteousness, then peace (cf., 1Co 1:30; Rom 5:1).
2. It is established with the specific intent of blessing Abraham and his seed. Compare Gen 12:3; Psa 122:6–9; and 1Pe 3:9.
3. It is a priesthood “*made like the Son of God.*” Melchizedek was so “*made,*” by virtue of Scriptures’ silence about him. We who believe in Christ are literally being “*conformed to the image of His [God’s] Son*” (Rom 8:29).
4. It is a priesthood that is superior to Abraham, his seed, and the Levitical priesthood—both because it is royal and because it is eternal.
5. The priesthood of the order of Melchizedek is “tithed” by Abraham, and therefore also, by the Levitical order. Yet in the future, I expect, the Church will receive “*tithes*” from regenerate Israel. This will occur first after the battle of Armageddon, in which we will play a part, and then on into the Millennial Kingdom and beyond.
6. The priesthood of Melchizedek is an order not based on a physical descent from the lineage of Abraham. It is a spiritual, not a physical order. That is to say, a heavenly, not an earthly, order.
7. As the “*lesser is blessed by the better [greater]*” (Heb 7:7) so the priesthood after Melchizedek—of which Christ is the High-priest—is superior in every way to the future regenerate seed of Abraham, and the priesthood of Levi, which will be revived in the Kingdom.

Application:

The highest position in ancient Israel was that of the high priest. This spiritual status was shared, to a lesser degree, by every priest. Yet we Church-Age believers, have been given “in Christ” the highest position in all of history! And with that position comes awesome provisions and great responsibility. How are we to fulfill such a high and holy calling? We turn now to the ministry of the Mystery.

VI. The Ministry of the Mystery—Rom 11:25–12:2; Heb 11:39–12:2

“For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery ... that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in ... according to my gospel ... according to the revelation of the mystery ... according to the commandment of the everlasting God ... for obedience to the faith.” Rom 11:25, Rom 16:25–26

Lest we lose our thread, let me present the implications from what we have studied to this point.

A. Implications of the Mystery Doctrine

1. The “mystery,” first mentioned by Jesus and later revealed to Paul, contains specific provisions and instruction for a new creation (the Church of Jesus Christ) to be applied during a unique age, which Paul calls “*the dispensation of the fullness of times*” (Eph 1:10), “*the dispensation of the grace of God*” (Eph 3:2), and “*the dispensation of the mystery*” (Eph 3:9 correctly translated).
2. The Church is a new creation (2Co 5:17; Eph 2:10)—neither the continuation nor the replacement of Israel. As the “Body of Christ,” the Church shares in all the blessings, possessions, and purposes of the Head—Jesus Christ.
3. As Jesus Christ is High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, so every believer in this present dispensation shares in that priesthood, and in its present function.
4. The order of Melchizedek is shown to have a purpose in blessing the nations, but especially being a blessing to Abraham and to his physical seed.
5. God ordained, before time began, that it would be the Church, exercising her mighty and effective priesthood that would make possible the ultimate return of Israel to faith, regeneration, and reconciliation.

B. The Mystery Anticipated, Yet Unknown in Old Testament

Paul specifically declares that the Mystery revealed to him was hidden and kept secret from the prophets of the Old Testament (Rom 16:25; Eph 3:5). There were, however, hints of “something” yet to be revealed:

1. Moses spoke of “*secret things*” that did not pertain to Israel (Deu 29:29). This is in the context of Israel’s dispersion and ultimate restoration.
2. Moses anticipated the day that Israel would be “*provoked*” by a non-nation (Deu 32:21). This “non-people” could only be the Church of Jesus Christ.
3. Psa 78:2 anticipates the Messiah, giving new revelation “things kept secret from the foundation of the world.” According to Matthew, this Jesus did in the Kingdom of Heaven parables (Mat 13:35).
4. Psa 102:18–22 looks forward to “*a people yet to be created*” who would “*praise the LORD.*”
5. Hos 2:23 anticipates the time when those “*who were not My people*” will become the people of God. In Rom 9:25–26, Paul applied this to the Church.

C. The Ministry of the Mystery

We who belong to the Body of Christ have been given unprecedented provisions and privileges. These carry with them great responsibilities. These include the need to grow to maturity, in order to understand the mystery and all its implications (1Co 2:6–16). There is a need to understand our unique gifting (1Co 12:4–7) and the call of our three-fold ministry (priesthood—1Pe.2:5–9; ambassadorship—2Co 5:14–21; and ministry—Rom 12:3–8; 1Pe 4:10–11). We have been given the collective responsibility to “*make disciples of all nations*” (Mat 28:18–20) through missionary outreach. But with all these, we also have a responsibility toward Israel.

D. The Ministry of the Church to Israel

1. It is a ministry of example and provocation (Rom 10:14–21). While we often use Rom 10:14–15 as a “missionary message,” we seldom connect it in the context with the ministry of “provocation,” which Paul quotes from Moses (Deu 32:21). The word “provoke” is from *para* (“beside”) and *zeloo* (“zeal, to set one’s heart on”). The idea here is to “provoke in comparison to something else; to be jealous in comparison to,” thus to “provoke in order to emulate another.” Israel—the elect and privileged of all nations (Rom 9:4–5)—will see what God has done with the “lowly Gentiles” and “*those who did not seek Me*” (Rom 10:20), and be provoked into action.
2. It is a ministry of gratitude to God for Israel (Rom 11:11–24). Paul warns here against an attitude of arrogance toward Israel. All we have comes from and through them—from the written Word to the Living Word. We are cautioned to always remember that “*the root supports you*” (Rom 11:18). In Rom 11:22, I find in the words “*otherwise you also will be cut off,*” a warning that the Rapture of the Church will come at a time when the Church is failing in her responsibilities.
3. It is a ministry of prayer and intercession for the nation of Israel (Rom 11:11–31). There is no question that Israel’s blindness will continue until the Rapture of the Church. The “*until*” of Rom 11:25 (the Greek word *achri*, with the subjunctive mood) is a term of limitation. It anticipates a future point of time. As a result, we should be looking forward to God’s future dealings with Israel (Rom 11:26–27) and interceding for them out of the love of Christ (Rom 11:26–32; 2Co 5:14). In this way, we truly fulfill our priesthood “*according to the order of Melchizedek*” (Heb 7:11) in blessing Abraham and his seed.

E. An Interesting Challenge—Rom 11:30–12:2; Heb 11:39–12:2

There is an amazing parallel between these two passages. Consider the following:

1. In Rom 11:30–31, Paul uses the word “*mercy*” four times, showing that just as mercy came to us through Israel, so also through us—as the Church—God would in turn bring mercy to Israel. He then launches into an exhortation, in Rom 12:1–

2, based on “*the mercies of God,*” to become a “*living sacrifice*” to “*prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*” While it has been common practice to relate the “*mercies*” back to Romans 4–8, I would recommend that we also keep it in the context of our mutual debt and ministry to Israel.

2. Now note Heb 11:39–12:2:

“And all these [O.T. saints], having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us [Church-Age believers], that they should not be made perfect apart from us ...” Heb 11:39–40

The phrase “*apart from us*” is significant. It not only implies a sharing of future glory together, but that we play an instrumental part in bringing this to pass. He then says to us as members of Christ’s Body:

“Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Heb 12:1–2

Practical Application:

What an amazing and astounding thought, that just as we look to the “*heroes of the faith*” from the Old Testament, even so—in the future—Jewish believers in the time of the Tribulation will look back to another “*cloud of witnesses*”—those believers who ran their race with the endurance of faith. Will you be one of them?

VII. Follow The Colors!

God chose Paul to be the flag-bearer of the Church. The word “*pattern*” used in Phi 3:17 and 1Ti 1:16 meant “an imprint left by a blow,” thus “a stamp, identifying mark, the standard or example.” Like soldiers on the battlefield, we are to follow the flag—or guidon—to victory. This brings us to an interesting question that Bible students and theologians have long asked.

A. What Was the Secret to Paul’s Ministry?

“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.” 1Co 15:9–10

1. Paul fully exploited to the grace that was given, not only to him, but to each and every Church-Age believer. The true secret to Paul’s great effectiveness was not his great intellect, nor his intense training as a Pharisee, nor to his gift. If we think these are essential to effective ministry and historical impact, we deny what Paul plainly teaches us (see 1Co 1:26–31 and 2Co 12:9–10), and excuse ourselves from his command, “*imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ*” (1Co 11:1). Literally, he says “become imitators of me,” and this speaks of a process of spiritual growth and discipline. The phrase “*just as*” is *kathos* and speaks of a set, precise manner. And to take it one step further, the word “*Christ*” is a genitive of means. To quote again the Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament, “*Paul’s appeal to the character of Jesus of Nazareth shows Paul’s interest in the earthly life of Christ*” (p. 422).
2. In what way did Paul imitate Christ? What secret did he find in the life of Christ that he was able to adopt to such powerful effect? There is one thing, and one thing only, that we find both in the life of Christ and in that of the Apostle to the Gentiles. That one thing is that Paul saw—and imitated—the prayer life of our Lord.

“Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place, and there He prayed.” Mar 1:35

This is all the more powerful if we conclude that Paul knew, as part of the Mystery Doctrine, that Christ was seated at God’s right hand as “*priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*” (Heb 7:21b). And he realized also that we who are seated with Him (Col 3:1–4) are to engage and share in His present high-priestly service.

B. In the Holy of Holies—Heb 9:11–16

There is a major difference between the Levitical order of priests and that of Melchizedek. Under the old order, only the high priest was ever permitted to enter into the “holy of holies,” and that was once a year on the day of atonement (Lev 16:1–34)). When he entered, he had to be washed with water, and had to bring the blood of the sin offering and incense—lest he die (Lev 16:13–14; Heb 9:6–8). Even when Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, entered and assumed the right reserved for the high priest, they were destroyed (Lev 10:1–3; cf., 1Co 3:17). Another critical thing to see is that while the sacrifice spoke of the cross, the incense was a picture of the “*prayers of the saints*” (Luk 1:9–10; Rev 5:8b, Rev 8:3). The prayers are offered on the basis of the sacrifice!

However, we who serve in the order of Melchizedek have open access, not to an earthly holy of holies, but to the real one in the heavens (Heb 9:11–16). Of this new priestly service, we can see five things:

1. Jesus Christ is a greater High Priest, serving in a much greater tabernacle, and of a far superior priestly order (Heb 9:11).
2. His blood (the crucifixion) provided eternal redemption, therefore “*He entered the Most Holy Place once for all*” (Heb 9:12). In other words, His priesthood is eternal.
3. Because of this, all who believe in Him, and are united to Him by faith, have been purified by His Spirit to serve with Him (Heb 9:13–14).
4. Since Christ is the “*Mediator of the new covenant*” (Heb 9:15), it is this service to which we must dedicate ourselves. Concerning this, a few points are in order:
 - a. The New Covenant was originally promised to Israel (Jer 31:33; Eze 36:22–27).
 - b. By our faith in Jesus Christ, we have entered into the New Covenant, not only as recipients, but as priests (Mat 26:28; Mar 14:24; Luk 22:20; 1Pe 2:5–9).
 - c. Just as the Old Covenant had a priesthood (the Levites), even so the New Covenant must have a priesthood (that of Melchizedek).
 - d. The ministry of the order of Melchizedek is primarily that of intercessory prayer, as proven by Jesus’ present session in Heaven (Rom 8:34).
5. The ministry of the New Covenant has as its focus “*the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant*” (Heb 9:15b)—that is, to Israel.

C. Summary

1. As a priest of the order of Melchizedek, the Apostle Paul devoted himself to intercessory prayer for all the saints and churches (Rom 1:8–9; 1Co 1:4–5; Eph 1:15–23, Eph 3:14–21, Eph 6:18–20; Phi 1:3–11; Col 3:3–4; 1Th 1:2–3; 2Th 1:3).
2. In fact, by his own admission, the burden of intercession was the heaviest of all Paul’s burdens (2Co 11:28).

3. However, although as the Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom 11:13; Gal 2:8), Paul never ceased to serve as a priest, interceding on behalf of Israel (Rom 9:1–3; Rom 10:1–2; Rom 11:1).
4. If we are to follow Christ, by imitating Paul, we will do well to consider carefully his ministry as a priest of the order of Melchizedek.

Point: It is crucial to see that a priest is appointed on behalf of others (Heb 5:1–4). This means that we set ourselves aside, to bear the burdens of others before the throne of God’s grace. In all of Paul’s prayers (with one exception), we see him praying for others. Concerning his own needs, he asks others to pray for him (Eph 6:18–20; 1Th 5:25). In the one record of Paul praying for himself (2Co 12:8–10), his request was denied. I believe Satan has found the way to neutralize the awesome power of the prayers of the priesthood. He simply works to keep us preoccupied with our own needs and concerns, and thus robs us of the mighty impact of a selfless life of intercession, where we leave our concerns to God and others to bear.

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Gal 6:2

Five Closing Questions:

1. What did Melchizedek offer to Abram when he returned from the victory over the Gentile armies? Answer—bread and wine! (Gen 14:18).
2. And what, under the High Priest of this order, do these elements signify? Answer—the New Covenant (Mat 26:26–28). We move from Passover (expectation) to the Lord’s Table (*“It is finished,”* Joh 19:30). The Passover looked forward to the *“Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world”* (Joh.1:29). The Lord’s Table is a declaration that He has come, paid the debt of sin, and is now seated at the right hand of God (Psa 110:1; Heb 1:5, Heb 1:13).
3. And to whom was the New Covenant first promised? Answer—to Israel (Jer 31:31; Eze 36:22).
4. And how do we, as the Body of Christ, fit into this promise? Answer—as the priesthood by whom Israel will yet (in the future) receive it (Rom 11:30–31).
5. And how can we fulfill our priesthood in regard to Israel? Answer—**three ways:**
 - a. *“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem”* (Psa 122:6). They will have no peace, until they receive the Prince of Peace. *“For I say to you, you shall see Me no more till you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord’”* (Mat 23:39).
 - b. Be an example of overcoming faith—a provocation to them—just as the heroes of faith in ancient Israel have been to us (Rom 10:19, Rom 11:11–14; Heb 11:39–12:3).
 - c. Celebrate often the Lord’s Table, which is a perpetual witness to Israel that the New Covenant has come through the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes.” 1Co 11:26

A Last Thought:

Can you imagine how one day the eyes of the 144,000 (*“of all the tribes of the children of Israel,”* Rev 7:4) will be opened, and how they will then view the tens of thousands of Christians who came to see the empty tomb, and then celebrated the Lord’s Supper there? Can you imagine the fire that will burn in their souls, how they will be provoked to action, when they realize that, for 2,000 years, Gentiles had been celebrating the victory of the Messiah, while they were still looking for His coming?

The Lord knew what He was doing when He took the “old” Passover meal, and instituted something “new,”—the communion, which spoke of His finished work.

But it must never be simply “ritual without reality.” There is very sound practical action that must accompany it, for it to be true to the Spirit. Our friend and brother Paul said it best:

“Therefore purge out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.” 1Co 5:7–8