

The Great Mystery

by Ray C. Stedman

We have seen that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Romans from Corinth. And now we have come to the very last paragraph of the letter. Very likely at this point, Paul took the pen and wrote the closing paragraph in his own hand. Paul tells us in Second Thessalonians that this was his custom {2 Th 3:17}. He did this to protect his letters from forgery, for one thing, but also to bear a personal greeting to those to whom he was writing. I think almost all scholars agree that the apostle probably suffered from a serious eye problem. The letter to the Galatians suggests that. So Paul wrote these marvelous words in large letters with his own hand, Verses 25-27:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. {Rom 16:25-27 NIV}

Those remarkable words constitute a summary of the whole letter to the Romans – a beautiful finale to this great epistle. I have chosen this as the central study around which we may gather as we come to the table of the Lord this morning. You will notice that the goal the apostle has in view in writing this letter and summary is that we who read this letter may be *established*.

Have you ever had the desire to be established?

- Many people think they are established when actually they are simply stuck in the mud.
- Most of us think that being established means that all progress ceases. We sit down, camp there, and that is it. In that sense, there are a lot of Christians who are established.
- But when Paul speaks of our being established, he means putting us on solid, stable ground.

Have you ever erected a picnic table and tried to find a place where all four legs touched the ground at the same time? You tried to establish it so that it would not rock, or become shaky, or uncertain. That is the idea that Paul has in mind in this word establish. God wants to bring you and me to a place where we are no longer rocking or shaky or unstable, but solid and secure. The idea is basically what all human beings look for – an inner security from which you can handle all the problems of life. You become dependable, and have a true sense of worth, so that nothing gets to you, or shakes you up, or throws you off balance.

This is the goal of all Christian teaching in the New Testament (and especially the goal of the letter to the Romans) that we believers might be brought to that place of security where we are not shaken by things, so that we do not lose our tempers easily, or get frustrated, angry, resentful or

hostile; where we do not scream at our children, or yell at our mates, or get upset at the neighbors.

Notice the resource that the apostle counts on to make that happen: “Now to him who is able to establish you...” It is God himself who is responsible for this. You and I are not given the final responsibility to bring this about. Isn’t that encouraging? Now there are things he asks us to do: We are to understand what he is saying to us in this letter, and we are to willingly cooperate with it and give ourselves to it. But even if we do not, Paul is saying, we do not have the ultimate responsibility to bring this about. God will do it.

I am sure, as the apostle wrote this, he had in mind all the instances and circumstances from the past that are given to us in the Old Testament to encourage us.

- God did this with Abraham, who was an idol worshiper. Abraham could not tell the truth about his wife. He was always lying about her because he thought that would save him from difficulty. He had various character faults but God stabilized him, established him, and brought him to a place where he became one of the great names of all time.
- God did this with Moses and David and, of course, with Paul himself. Paul was a brilliant young Jew with an ambitious heart, a sharp mind and a strong sense of achievement, due to his notable gifts and his desire to become famous. Yet God broke him, softened him, changed him and put him through circumstances that Paul did not understand at the time. This finally established him, so that no matter what came, he remained strong, steady, trusting and certain. That is the great good news of this letter. “Now to him who is able to establish you...”

Paul goes on to give us three things that God will use during that process:

1. First he says, “Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel...” Now, do not misunderstand that little phrase. Paul does not mean by this that he has a unique gospel. Unfortunately, some teachers have taken these words in that way, and have concluded that the Apostle Paul was giving a special revelation

that no one else possessed – one that Peter, James and John and other writers of Scripture did not know. That teaching has been widespread among certain men of our day, and people have followed that delusion. That is not what Paul means. He answered that accusation in First Corinthians. He said, “Some of you are following me; some are following Apollos; some are following Cephas, and this is wrong. We are not different; we all have the same gospel. You are making too much of men. The message is always the same,” {1 Cor 1:11 ff}. He rebuked them for tending to divide and to follow certain leaders and teachers.

What Paul means is that he was given a unique revelation of this gospel, which the others understood, as well. You find that in Chapter 11 of First Corinthians: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you...’” {1 Cor 11:23-24a}. Paul is saying, “I was not there at the Lord’s supper. I was not even a Christian then. I have not talked with Peter or James or John about this, and none of the men who were present there told me what happened in that room. I know what happened because Jesus himself appeared to me and told me. And I told you only what I received from the Lord himself.” The Lord taught Paul the same gospel that the other apostles believed and that is what Paul means when he says, “According to my gospel...” The practical impact of that upon us is this: That the test of all true Christian messages is that they be in line with the apostolic writings. The apostles are the ones who tell us the truth about the gospel. That is why we must always check what we hear today that claims to be Christian and see if it fits with what the apostles gave us. Paul says that is what God will use to establish you: “My gospel – that which was given to me.”

2. The second element is “the proclamation of Jesus Christ.” Here Paul is unfolding to us the heart of his gospel. Paul was a mighty theologian. There has never been a greater theologian in the church. I sometimes go to seminars, and I am tempted to say to the young men

and women studying there, “Why waste your time with these fourth-rate theologians, when you could be spending your time with the first-rate theologians: Peter, James, John and Paul.” Theology was not the heart of Paul’s gospel. The heart of his gospel was the revelation of a Person, Jesus himself. All through this letter Paul has emphasized that fact again and again – everything centers in Christ. He is the heart of it all.

Therefore, a gospel that leaves out Christ is a phony gospel.

Jesus himself said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me,” {cf, John 14:6}. There Jesus declared the uniqueness of his position. In the whole realm of theology there is no one like Jesus Christ. In all the history of the religions of the world, there is no one that is equal to him, or that can be remotely compared to him. Therefore, any gospel that minimizes Christ, or puts him on the level of other names, is a perversion of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ is the central figure of all history, of all time, of all faith.

3. There is a third element, the apostle says, which has been the theme throughout Romans, although it is not always called by the same terms. Paul says, “God will not only use my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, but what he will use to establish you is the explanation of ‘the mystery.’”

... according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – {Rom 16:25b-26 NIV}

There is the mystery. Here is the ultimate test of any Christian message: Does it proclaim the mystery?

There are thousands of places in this land today where people are meeting, as we are, in Christian churches. They are singing the same hymns we sing, and reading the same Bible, and praising God in the same way. And yet, in thousands and thousands of those churches, there is nothing exciting happening, nothing

that reaches out and touches the community. Do you know why? Because the mystery is not being proclaimed.

After the early service this morning someone told me of a town in California of about 8,000 people, where there are 22 churches. And, according to this individual, almost all of these churches are lifeless. Nothing is happening because they do not understand the mystery.

Here is the heart of the gospel, this amazing mystery. The question we need to ask about any church is, “Does it ask men and women to live on the basis of that fantastic secret, which was once hidden but is now fully revealed?”

What is this mystery? There are several references to it in the New Testament, sometimes referring to a part of it, sometimes referring to the whole. The only other reference to this mystery in the letter to the Romans is found in Chapter 11, Verses 25-26:

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited [when Christians become conceited it is because they have forgotten the mystery]: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: {Rom 11:25-26 NIV}

Now that is part of the mystery. Paul is referring to the fact that God intends to unite both Jews and Gentiles into one body. For this to happen, the Jews must be partially blinded for a while, in order to allow the Gentiles to see. That is what has been going on for 2,000 years of human history: a partial blindness in Israel. We do not understand fully what is involved here, but it seems to be necessary in the program of God.

That aspect of the mystery is also referred to in Ephesians 3:2-6:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight

into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets [The New Testament apostles and prophets]. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus. {Eph 3:2-6 NIV}

Now that is a very important part of the mystery. But these references to parts of the mystery are not to be regarded as distinct and separate mysteries. They are all one, as we will see. The heart of the mystery is given to us in the opening chapter of Colossians. Here is one of the clearest statements on it (Verses 24-27):

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. {Col 1:24-27 NIV}

There is the mystery. All that God is, wrapped up in a Person and given to you and to me – the only hope we have of ever discovering the glory that God intended for us as human beings: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

There is another reference to the wonder of this mystery in First Timothy 3:16. Paul describes it in terms of a hymn of the early church. He says,

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:

**He appeared in a body,
was vindicated by the Spirit,
was seen by angels,
was preached among the nations,
was believed on in the world,
was taken up in glory.**

{1 Tim 3:16 NIV}

Jesus himself is the mystery. By means of the virgin birth of Jesus, by means of his holy, sinless

life, by means of his substitutionary death upon a violent and cruel cross, by means of his startling break-out from the prison of death, and by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, God has given Jesus – all that he is and all that he has – to you and to me.

This enables us to do two things:

- To deny our natural abilities and strengths, and
- To rely wholly on Jesus' ability and strength –

and thus to live our lives today as though Jesus himself was living them.

That is the mystery. That is the radical, powerful secret of authentic Christianity: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Do you know that mystery?

Do you know it, not only in your mind, but do you live it?

It is the knowledge of it and the living of it that turns Christianity into an exciting adventure. It may be demanding, it may even be scary, but I can guarantee you one thing: It will never be boring, because the mystery is at work.

If you are filled with the secret, the indwelling Christ, it does not make any difference if you are a Jew or a Gentile. All the divisions of class and sex and national origin are eliminated by that secret. It does not make any difference whether you are rich or poor, slave or free, all are one in Christ Jesus by that mystery. And whenever a Christian lives on that basis, really trusting the fact that God is in him through Jesus Christ to be his wisdom, his power, his strength; when he attempts things only on the basis of expecting God to fulfill that promise, and moves out to do things by his grace, he finds himself *established*.

If you want a place of security, it is not going to come by your reckoning on what you can do for God. That will never work. It is going to depend on how much you believe God is ready to do something through you. That is the radical promise.

Paul says two additional things about this:

- First, though the results of this lifestyle were experienced by men and women of God in the Old Testament, no explanation was ever given of how this happened. When you read the Old Testament you find men and women puzzled as to how God was going to put together all its

great promises and themes. There is the promise of the restoration of Israel. There is the promise of the forgiveness of an individual's sins. There is the mighty promise of the healing of the nations and the cessation of war. Then it began to unfold. Jesus came. He was the secret. He would be the one who would bring to pass all the tremendous promises and themes of the Old Testament. Therefore, the historic appearance of Jesus was required to put this victorious lifestyle in such vivid light that it could be preached and demonstrated to the nations of the world. That is what Paul means when he says that the mystery was "hidden for long ages past, but now revealed."

- The second thing Paul says is that it was "made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God." There is a reference to the New Testament as we have it today. The apostles and prophets wrote the gospel down for us so that we might have a clear picture of who Jesus is, and what he can be in us. This is why we must study the New Testament, particularly, and the Old Testament as well, that we might understand how to live on this basis.

And so Paul closes with a great doxology,

– to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

{Rom 16:27 NIV}

What a plan! What a program! What a change happens when people really capture this and begin to operate on it.

We are going to close the service with the Lord's Table which is itself a dramatic retelling of the mystery of the gospel:

- When we take the cup, we are being reminded that, by the death of Jesus, God cut off all the natural abilities and strengths that we have, and rendered them worthless. The New Testament teaches us that the flesh cannot please God.
- But when we take the bread, we are reminding ourselves that Jesus himself, the bread that came down from heaven, is available to us. His strength, his power, operating through the channel of our gifts, can accomplish what we could never do by ourselves. God at work within us; that is the mystery.

When we come to the Lord's Table we are reminding ourselves of this, and renewing our promise, our commitment to fulfill that mystery not only here at church, but in every situation throughout the week. Every moment of pressure and every demand upon us are simply opportunities to respond by realizing again the validity of the mystery.

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