

1 Introduction

I'm sure that we all love a mystery story. Let's face it there are plenty being shown on the repeat channels on television and they usually involve murder and mayhem. Just think about it; we can regularly watch episodes of Morse, Lewis, Midsomer Murders, Poirot, Miss Marple and Murder, She Wrote to name but a few. Just recently I've been listening to episodes of Paul Temple on BBC 4Extra. These were recorded in 1957 but are good mystery stories with nothing totally revealed until the end of the series. Of course there are also plenty of mystery books available in bookshops or on Amazon if you prefer to read rather than watch or listen. Some of these relate to true stories whilst many others are fiction. There's plenty to go at if that's what interests you.

The Bible also has plenty of mysteries contained within it; in fact there are many people who regard the whole of Scripture to be a mystery! As we continue our study in Ephesians, this morning I want to move on to think about the mystery that Paul mentions in **1:9-10**. The Bible is undoubtedly a mystery for far too many people simply because they have yet to come to faith in Christ, a step which would allow them to seek the Holy Spirit's help in understanding what God is saying through His Word. None of us can truly understand what Scripture is saying if we don't have the Holy Spirit in us and with us. That is why non-believers will always find the Bible as a whole to be almost a total mystery as they don't have the enlightenment and assistance provided by the Holy Spirit.

There are quite a few verses in Scripture that talk about mystery. However, I really want to focus on the mystery that Paul talks of in **1:9-10**. As ever with Scripture we need to read these verses very carefully as the middle section is actually in parentheses and we need to read over that for the moment so that we can focus on the main thought that Paul is putting forward. If we take out the words in parentheses then we can see that Paul tells us: "*he made known to us the mystery of his will ... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*" These verses are talking about both the future and the foundation of the church of which Jesus Christ is the Head.

The word *mystery* in modern speech means a sublime or unclear truth that is marvelled at but only partly understood. The Greek word that Paul uses is *mystērion* which describes any divine or heavenly reality which is regarded as hidden or secret and can be made known only when revealed spiritually. In the ancient world a mystery was something unknown to most people but specially revealed to some. The clue for Christians comes in the necessary knowledge being specially revealed by the Holy Spirit. Once we come to faith in Christ we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and it is He Who helps us to understand what God is saying to us through Scripture.

The American Commentator James Montgomery Boice has this to say about "*mystery*": Paul "*uses 'mystery' to refer to something that at one time was not known and could not be arrived at by any amount of human reasoning, but that has now been revealed to us by God through such inspired teachers as himself and the other Apostles.*"¹

¹ Boice, James Montgomery, *Romans Volume 3 - God and History (Romans 9-11)*, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993, Page 1369

2 The Mystery

There are a number of mysteries contained in Scripture, some in the Old Testament, some in the Gospels and some in the Epistles; in fact Paul uses the Greek word *mysterion* more than any other writer in the Bible. I don't propose to look at all of these mysteries as I'm mainly concerned with the mystery mentioned here in **1:9-10**. However, I do want to mention the mystery of the relationship between God and the Gentiles as it plays an important part in God's overall and eternal plan for His universe. God's message of salvation, forgiveness and reconciliation was always intended to be inclusive with no one excluded. Each part of God's plan was to be implemented in the fullness of time; i.e. when God decided the time was right. When God stopped Saul in his tracks on the Damascus Road, not only did He want him as one of His workers but he also set the newly named Paul aside as Pastor to the Gentiles. Consequently Paul's main ministry was to take the good news of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. That was a total mystery to the Jews as they believed that they were God's chosen people and they struggled to accept that the despised Gentiles were included in God's plans in any way.

Paul made this mystery clear in **3:4-6** when he told his readers *"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. 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 in Christ Jesus."* This astounding statement served to confirm God's plan that the Gentiles were to be included on equal terms with Jews in His new society.

This wasn't a last minute plan that God came up with when the Jews turned away from Him. We know from **Isaiah 42:6-7** that *"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."* This was an early prophecy of the future ministry of Jesus to the Gentiles and is quoted by **Luke** in **2:30-32** where he records Simeon's words on seeing the baby Jesus. This faithful old man said at that time: *"For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* (**Luke 2:30-32**) Despite those words this was still a complete mystery to the Jews who firmly believed that they were still God's chosen people despite turning away from Him and ignoring His commands.

3 The World As It Is Now

Before we look at the mystery Paul introduces in **1:9-10** I want us to briefly think about the world as it is now; it's not a pretty sight! I'm sure that there are many here today who will agree with me that we live in a strange world in strange times. We live in a world in turmoil; we live in a world that has lost its moral compass; we live in a world in need of rescue. One of my favourite preachers and commentators, John MacArthur puts it this way: *"At the present time the universe is anything but unified. It is corrupted, divided, and splintered."*

*Satan is now 'the ruler of this world'.*² To my way of thinking the world does indeed seem to be being controlled by Satan as more and more people move further and further away from any sort of relationship with God and succumb to the evils of sin.

If you find that difficult to believe then let me help by giving you some examples of sin at work. Remember that until we come to faith in Jesus Christ and repent of our sins, God regards us as sinners without hope. You may not agree and whilst some of the examples I am about to give may not be part of your lifestyle they most certainly apply to many, many people throughout the country.

We have seen a number of criminal cases recently of parents, or step-parents, killing their own children. In many cases this is as a result of the breakdown of the family that God intended. There are more and more children being abandoned or taken into care. There are far too many children who don't know who their father is, and if they do know him they have little or no relationship with him. This dreadful situation is causing a massive breakdown in society. This is not the world God created or intended.

There is apparently a massive growth in the use of illegal drugs amongst the middle classes who think it is "cool" to do so; their attitude seems to be that they won't become addicts; that's for the lower classes! Drugs destroy lives which is Satan's aim! This is not the world God created or intended.

In recent years we have seen a massive rise of gay culture. We are expected to accept this and honour the gay community by allowing the holding of parades and the flying of flags. In many cases we are not allowed to hold St George's Day parades whilst at the same time supporting the gay community has become a vital part of modern society. The laws of the land have been re-written to protect such people and we now permit men to marry men and women to marry women. Let me remind you that God gave marriage to be between man and woman for procreation; anything else is a sin. Where did all this come from; how did we come to this situation? This is not the world God created or intended.

The Bible is quite clear on homosexuality. With regard to homosexuality we read in **Leviticus 18:22**, "*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.*" (ESV). The NLT is even more direct when it translates this verse as "*Do not practice homosexuality, having sex with another man as with a woman. It is a detestable sin.*" Regarding marriage we read in **Genesis 2:24**, "*... a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*" That seems clear to me; God says that marriage should be between a man and a woman. There is no mention in Scripture of any other combination.

As an adjunct to the gay culture we now have this latest manifestation known as transgenderism whereby people want to change the gender that was "assigned" to them at birth. In other words, boys want to become girls and girls want to become boys. Not only is this trend growing but we are seeing young people taking drugs and undergoing surgery to

² MacArthur, John, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary - Ephesians*, Moody Publishers: Chicago, 1986, page 26

achieve this change. To me that implies that transgender people are suggesting God made a mistake with their gender when they were born. What a blasphemous insult; God does not make mistakes. Gender identification is becoming more confusing by the day. I read recently that the BBC now has a consultant on gender issues who has identified over 150 genders! This is not the world God created or intended. My Bible tells me in **Genesis 2** that God created man and woman; that's two genders!

I've already mentioned that the Bible says that God finds man lying with man an abomination and yet the established Church of England has any number of gay priests, some of whom are in civil partnerships or even married, in the "modern" way. The same thing and more is happening in the Church of Wales and the Church of Scotland. Why is this happening? Why is the major nominally Christian denomination not following what Scripture says? This is not the world that God created or intended.

Let me give you one last example of the sins that seem to be proliferating in the world today. We know that there is a massive and devastating war in Ukraine right now. However, there are numerous other parts of the world that are also experiencing wars. Very few of these receive much publicity on the news broadcasts and we rarely hear about them. In fact about the only time we do hear about such wars is when an appeal goes out to help with humanitarian aid. Each of these wars sees man killing man for the sake of it and to gain power. God created a world for peace and you may recall that the first word spoken by Jesus in the Upper Room following His resurrection was "peace". Jesus came to bring reconciliation between people and between man and God. He didn't come to initiate or encourage wars. The situation that we see nightly on our television screens does not show a world that God created or intended.

4 The World As It Will Be

Given what I've just been saying it is all too easy to become despondent and wonder what on earth is going on. However; those who have faith in Jesus and regard Him as their Lord and Saviour need not worry since we know that God is in control. Paul wrote to the church in Philippi in an effort to rebuke the Jews in the church who wanted the Gentile members to adopt the Jewish customs in addition to following Christ. To help in that fight Paul reminded them, "... *our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*" (**Philippians 3:20-21**) In his sermon last week from **Philippians 1:18-26**, Francis mentioned what Paul may have been thinking when he said, "*Do not fear the Lord Who we serve is a God Who reverses things.*" Francis then added, "*Under the Lord's plan He will turn every situation around for His glory and for His kingdom.*"³ Notice those words, "every situation"; there is nothing that God cannot reverse as His plan comes to fruition. It is that plan that Paul is talking about here in **1:9-10**. It was God's plan from the very beginning and it is why we are able to have confidence in Christ.

³ Williamson, Francis, Sermon titled *Confidence in Christ* at Kings Norton Baptist Church on 03 Jul 2022

It is in these two verses, **1:9-10**; that Paul tells us more about the plan that God has already made known to us in both understanding and experience and it is the mystery which has always been at the centre of His will. I mentioned earlier that a mystery can mean a secret that has just been revealed or is about to be revealed. In these verses in Ephesians "*mystery*" means something too magnificent to be fully grasped. This mystery is so divine in scope that it can only be understood by those who already know Jesus as Lord and Saviour. That is simply because the mystery is made known by God to men through the Holy Spirit and only those whose faith is in Jesus Christ have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. The timing of when this mystery will be revealed is dealt with in the few words in **1:9-10** that are in parentheses. Paul says in that part of the verse that this mystery will only "*be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment*". Paul refers to the "*fullness of time*" in **1:10** but isn't necessarily referring to the future. For instance, we learn in **Galatians 4:4-5** that Christ has already come to bring redemption and adoption since "*the time had fully come*", a phrase which refers to the latter days that began with Christ's birth and redemptive work. Christ is the Saviour Who has come to put the fragmented world back together; especially those splintered relationships in the families of that world. The time is not right now but will come when God decrees and when it fits in with His will.

At the present time Jesus is building His church as more and more people come to faith in Him. Remember that the church is not the building in which we meet but is "*built*" from all those who have placed their faith in Christ. In **Colossians 1:18** Paul reminds us that Jesus is the Head of the Church when he says, "*... he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*" The Apostle goes further in **Ephesians 1:22-23** when he adds "*... God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*" It is only right and proper that as a result we should all honour and worship Him. When the times are right God's eternal plan will be put into operation and then "*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" (**Philippians 2:10-11**). It is at that time that Jesus will take His rightful place as the Head of God's creation and everyone will acknowledge Him as their Lord. As the Apostle John points out, Satan's reign will come to an end and it will be "*the time for judgement on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out.*" (**John 12:31**).

5 Conclusion

As we look around it is all too easy to become despondent at the state of the world in which we find ourselves. However, Scripture assures that this dire situation will not persist and when Christ returns to claim His kingdom everything will change and He will be the Head of a United Church and a United Universe.

We need to be prepared for that day since it "*will come like a thief in the night*" (**1 Thessalonians 5:2**). At that time the world will be transformed and Satan will be defeated once and for all. Sadly of course all those who have failed to come to faith in Jesus will also be condemned whilst those who have accepted Jesus will enjoy eternal life in His presence

PE28 – It's a Mystery

in the new heaven and new earth that He will bring on His return. Make sure you are there when that time comes; it will be too good to miss.