

The Mystery Of The Gospel

Ephesians 6:19-20

19 (Pray) for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, 20 for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:19-20 (ESV))

Over my years of being a Christian as I have fellowshiped with others who claim the same blessed salvation of Christ, I have observed that it seems to be a common trait among us to always want to be able to fully “explain” everything that we encounter within these scriptures, who God is and the meanings and the purposes behind all that we encounter within His words.

And in many ways, that is the very best thing we could do! But with just a first glance at this request from the Apostle Paul, we can see that his purpose and his desire toward the unsaved is not to “explain” the “mystery of the gospel” to them, but rather, more simply, to “proclaim” it. And may I say, there really is a great deal of difference between those two pursuits, “explaining” the “mystery of the gospel” and the “proclaiming” of it.

Why do I find need to draw this distinction? It’s because I agree with a conclusion reached by Oswald Chambers regarding such behaviors of men, and that is that man believes that if He can “explain” a thing, he can begin to have and exercise some measure of control over it.

And that is especially true as it regards these truths of scripture. Well-meaning men spend their lives seeking to “explain” God so they can put Him and His truths into a neatly devised set of doctrines, attach a name to those doctrines and then profess them. Proof of that can be found in all the many different denominations we have formed within our Christian religion, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and on and on.

And again yes, God really does want you and me to know Him, and ever so intimately so, as a beloved son knows and loves His father, but only for that reason, for the reason of “love”. But as for all those other motives and pursuits of man, I have to believe that God desires none of that from us! Because too often, it leads us to try to make Presbyterians or Baptists or Methodists out of a person rather than just simply leading them to salvation. That is why we find that everything that God is and everything He does remains always cloaked in “mystery”, unexplainable, unfathomable truths known only to God Himself, with only an occasional revelation being shared within the minds of men, and then only when it will accomplish His purposes.

And that is especially so as it regards this “mystery of the gospel of Jesus Christ”. Yes, we can and we do know a great deal about this “gospel”. These scriptures are filled with the “good news” of it, but still, as these words tell us, this “gospel” remains a “mystery”. It is especially a “mystery” to those who do not yet know Christ as Savior and Lord. And that was the plea expressed by the Apostle Paul in asking for prayer that he would be able to “proclaim” the gospel rightly to the unbelieving Gentile world, to which he had been called by God as a special missionary.

Yes, there were a few Jews who lived there in Greek and Roman world, some of whom had been taught about the “coming of the Messiah”, and about the “gospel” He would bring. And some of those Jews readily received the message that Paul preached to them. But the vast number that Paul was seeking to reach with this “gospel” had never heard such things before, not because they were ignorant, many of them were highly educated, but rather it was because these truths were deeply spiritual, requiring a whole other form of learning and understanding than the Greeks and Romans had ever experienced before.

And therein lies the heart of the “mystery” that is spoken about here. And it is the very same mystery that we encounter today. Yes, the gospel can be “proclaimed” by men, such as Paul, and by you and me, but it can only be rightly “explained” to the minds of men by God Himself, through His Holy Spirit.

Consider with me the roadblock that exists within the minds of men, both in the day of Paul and also in our day. This “gospel”, the “good news” of who Jesus is and the “good news” of the provision He made for us by dying on the cross to pay for our sins just does not make good sense to most reasonable thinking people. The blood-soaked cross with a grotesquely disfigured body of a man hanging on it just does not fit the image of someone who is supposed to be “God”.

And also, as we consider the hearts of men, those for whom Christ hung there on that cross, we are not just innocent victims who happened to get caught in the middle between two warring ideological factions in the heavens. We are instead desperately wicked sinners, living daily within corrupt lifestyles, and for the most part truly enjoying our sinful behavior. And yes, we were born into our condition of sin. But regardless of how we got there, if we are left unchanged, we will surely eventually die and then be lost forever in a sea of eternally burning hell.

For the most part, the daily existence of an unbeliever is a rather simple one. Though their eyes be blinded to real truth, they do know that there are consequences for bad behavior, especially if they get caught in the things they do, cheating, lying, stealing.

But again, for the most part, they are blindly unaware that other consequences await them beyond when they breathe their last in this life. Yes, they have heard others talk about hell and about its miseries, but their minds are incapable of truly fathoming its horrors. And because of that, they just brush caution aside and at most joke about hell and its fury.

But herein is where the “mystery of the gospel” begins to do its work. Our Methodist friends call it “prevenient grace”, other bible scholars have named it something else. But regardless of the name given to it, it is God’s Holy Spirit beginning His work within the hearts of men, “tilling the ground”, making ready the souls of men to receive this blessed “mystery of the gospel”.

As we observe the responses of men, we can see that a strange change begins with their souls. They know something is wrong about their behavior, but can’t quite figure out what that wrongness might be. I relate it to the words given in Ecclesiastes 3 verse 11 that tell us

11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.
(Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV))

As part of His blessed grace, God’s Holy Spirit suddenly brings to our mind that there is more beyond the breaths that we breathe in this life, that once we breathe our last breath here, we enter into “time beyond time” “eternity”. And we begin to wonder that if that really is so, then what will take place during that “time beyond time”. And then someone quotes the words of Hebrews 9, verse 27 to us.

27 . . . it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,
(Hebrews 9:27 (ESV))

With those words, we realize that the next thing after our last breath is a judgment, a time of accountability for all the things and the behaviors we have done while in this life. And too often, that is when our common sense gets in the way and starts to tell us things to do to avoid those penalties that will be ours in that judgment. The most common response is that we rationalize that we must start trying to change our ways and become good people. We think that if we do, then God will possibly relent and not require us to suffer the real penalties we deserve for our past bad behavior, that perhaps the good we will do will somehow “offset” the bad.

And as we observe the many “false counselors and false preachers” out there today, that is exactly the “false gospel” that they give, especially in the pagan religions like that of Islam, and Buddhism and Hindu and the like. But unfortunately, that is also some of

the same foolish gospel that many of our “would-be evangelical churches” are also preaching. If we don’t think that to be true, all we have to do is tune our television to most any of the Christian television stations. There is some really false teaching taking place.

But even closer to home, we need only to ask our neighbor two simple questions, first, “If you were to die today, are you absolutely sure that you would go to be with Christ in heaven”? And too often, their answer is a timid, “I hope so”. And then as you ask them the next question, “If you were to stand before God today with God asking why you should be allowed into His kingdom”, their answers are too often seasoned with a “works” form of salvation answer. Yes, they would probably say things like, “well, I believe in Jesus”, but then they would also find need to add in such things as, “and I go to church, and I try to treat people right”, which reveals that they really don’t understand this “mystery of the gospel” spoken about here, that salvation comes only through the shed blood of Christ and that alone. And yes, after salvation we are supposed to do all those good things, but those good things really have nothing at all to do with the “gospel of salvation”.

Folks, this “mystery of the gospel” will forever be a mystery, even to the most learned and most devout of believers. But may I ask, “What is wrong with accepting that some things will forever remain a mystery”? And why not love the fact that this gospel will always be a mystery, with God only revealing certain portions of the mystery to us as He deems good to do so?

I must say that I treasure the “mysteries” of God. Why would that be so? It is because it helps me to trust His wisdom and not my own. He is a loving Father, and He knows how much of His truth that we are able to bear at any given moment within our growth. He knows that if we have knowledge, but not the wisdom and discernment to properly deal with that knowledge, then we will often be wounded by it. And even worse, we might unknowingly misuse that knowledge and hurt others with whom we share our knowledge.

So then, as it was with the Apostle Paul, so it should be with you and me. We are simply to have it be our purpose to “proclaim this gospel” with anyone who will listen, and to proclaim it loudly and boldly.

And as with the Apostle Paul, we are especially to share this “mystery of the gospel” with unbelievers. And yes, that sounds like I am “stating the obvious”, and I am. But understand that there is real solid purpose for doing this. It is because the hearts and souls of unbelievers are not yet prepared to hear many of the other “deeper” things we

might say to them about God. It would be much like trying to teach algebra to a first grader. Their hearts and minds have not been prepared to receive what they hear.

As it was with the special ministry of John the Baptist, before many of the “deeper” teachings that Jesus would later give to the people, they first needed a proper foundation to be built within their souls. John the Baptist prepared the way by declaring to the people in simple words that they were sinners in need of a Savior, and that they must turn from their wicked ways to repentance. Folks if the proper foundation is not laid, it will be like the house built upon the sand, when the storms come, it will fall. Looking back over my Christian life, I find that I have been guilty of unknowingly giving people the “false gospel” that I spoke about a moment ago. By that I mean, too often my advice to those who were in the throes of sinful behavior, has been that they should “be good”, “be kind”, “be faithful to their spouse”, and on and on. And yes, I should have said those things to them, but first I should have given them a foundation of the gospel. Then after that, I should have told them to “be kind”, “be good”, “be faithful to their spouse”. Simply put, an unbeliever is incapable of knowing and doing really good things if they do not first have the foundation of salvation within their souls. That why the gospel must be the beginning point!

Before we close for today, may I revisit some of the tenets behind these words of our passage? Listen! Paul asks,

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Here, God is revealing a special part of His plan for the salvation of men’s souls, and that is that if we join together in prayer, God’s Holy Spirit will enable the person who is giving the gospel to speak special, more powerful words, words that will convert the souls of unbelievers.

Does that mean that if we don’t pray that God will not act? No, it simply means what it says, that our part is to pray, and fervently so. Paul’s words again,

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These words intimate that God’s Spirit will make the words of Paul’s mouth more clearly understood and effectual, that he will not be timid or afraid, and that even if he fumbles in his presentation of the gospel, God will “fix” his words to make them effectual.

And again, what is the “mystery” that God is speaking about here? It is that for reasons known only to God, He chose, through salvation, to invite all of the rest of the world to be part of His special family, that the once exclusive relationship that He shared only with the Jews, was now open to you and me and all the other non-Jews on the earth, that He has, by grace, invited us to repent of our sins and receive Christ as our Savior and Lord. And the best part of the “mystery” is that it is all a free gift from Him.

8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV))

And again, we do not have to understand the “mystery” of why God would save and cleanse a wretch like you or me, but just that He will. And that His chosen way of bringing that salvation to man is through the “gospel”. Romans 1, verse 16,

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16 (ESV))