

The Mystery (God's Secret Plan)

Introduction

Brethren, do you believe:

- You were saved by believing that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again, which is the gospel of salvation (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 1:13-14)?
- You were saved by grace through faith apart from works (Ephesians 2:8-9)?
- That upon believing the gospel of salvation you were spiritually baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13)?
- Christ is the head of the church, which is His body (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18)?
- You are a member of the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:13, 27; Romans 12:5)?
- The body of Christ is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles without distinction (Ephesians 2:16; Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28)?
- You are, at this moment, recognized by God as seated in Christ at the right hand of God in the heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6)?
- You will go to heaven when you die (Philippians 3:20; II Corinthians 5:8)?
- You are blessed with all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3)?
- In the blessed hope, commonly called *the rapture*, which refers to you being caught up to meet the Lord in the air (I Thessalonians 4:13-17; Colossians 3:4; Titus 2:13)?
- You are no longer under the jurisdiction of the Law of Moses but under grace (Romans 6:14; Galatians 3:13)?
- You are an ambassador for Christ (II Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 3:10)?

I hope you can join me in answering “Yes” to all these questions. Did you know that all these truths of God were revealed to us only through Apostle Paul? Did you know that if you believe these things that you believe *the mystery*? Let us see what Scripture has to say about the mystery.¹

The Mystery Revealed

We are familiar with the division of the Bible into the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. According to Scripture, both testaments represent covenants made directly between God and Israel (Hebrews 9:11-22). The old testament, or covenant, began when God gave His chosen people (Israel) His law through Moses (Exodus 19:5-6; 24:8; Deuteronomy 5:1-3). The implementation of the new testament was revealed by Christ as He spoke of imminently shedding His blood for His people at the

¹ All references are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible (NASB Side-Column Reference Edition, Copyright © 1996 by The Lockman Foundation)* unless otherwise noted. Nonbolded words in brackets are either equivalent words from the *King James Version (KJV)* or, if in italics, were added by me for clarification.

cross (Luke 22:20). Israel was the promised (prophesied) beneficiary of the new covenant because it will cause the believing remnant (still in the future) to automatically, by nature, obey the requirements of the old covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:26-27). What about before Israel? What about us?

There are other, often less understood, major divisions or distinctions within the Bible. For example, there are the Law of Moses and the grace of God, the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God, and Israel and the body of Christ. All these distinctions, which together encompass the period from Genesis 1:1 through Revelation 22:21 (and after), fall under the major division of *prophecy* and *mystery*, or that which was spoken since the world began versus that which was hidden in God since *before* the world began. Prophecy explains God's earthly plan, while the mystery reveals His heavenly—and eternal—plan. Understanding this distinction is the key to understanding the Bible and which commands and promises apply to whom (II Timothy 2:15).

Prophecy—Since the World Began

The events of Christ's birth, ministry to Israel, death, and resurrection were prophesied throughout the Old Testament (Matthew 1:22; 2:13-15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; etc.). His disciples, however, did not understand what the Prophets were referring to until Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures concerning Himself (Luke 24:44-45). Even the fact that He would bear the sins of many and that His shed blood would justify the many was foretold; however, *the many* applied directly to the believers of His people Israel (Isaiah 53:10-12).

Therefore, God's plan regarding Christ's work for Israel was revealed in the Old Testament. Because of those prophecies, the people of Israel were looking forward to their Messiah, national deliverance from the oppression of their enemies, and their promised kingdom (on earth). However, because of their stubbornness and disobedience, the nation did not recognize or believe that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah.

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of David His servant—as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old. (Luke 1:68-70)

And He [*Jesus*] said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:25-27)

Now He [*Jesus*] said to them, “These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44)

“But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that

He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time. Moses said, ‘the Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him [Christ] you shall give heed to everything He says to you. And it will be that every soul that does not heed that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.’ And likewise, all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and his successors onward, also announced these days. It is you [Israel] who are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your seed [Christ] all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ For you first, God has raised up His Servant and sent Him to bless you by turning every one of you from your wicked ways.” (Acts 3:18-26)

Mystery—Since Before the World Began

When Apostle Paul wrote of the mystery, he was not referring to something mysterious, or something difficult to comprehend. He was simply referring to a body of truths that had previously been hidden in God—truths that God had not revealed to mankind until He did so through Paul. These truths were God’s secret plan or His sacred secret—they had not even been hinted at by the prophets of God or by Christ while He was on earth. We will see that the components of the mystery are all based on the work of Christ at the cross. Although Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection were prophesied in the Old Testament and by Christ Himself during His ministry on earth, the full ramifications of His work at the cross were hidden in God until revealed through Paul. The resulting blessings could not be found in the Law and the Prophets—they were the unsearchable riches of Christ (Ephesians 3:8). In fact, we are told that the rulers of that time would not have crucified Christ had they known the mystery regarding His work at the cross.

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages [world] to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (I Corinthians 2:6-8)

Now to Him [God] who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past [since the world began]. (Romans 16:25)

Of this church I [Paul] was made a minister according to the stewardship [dispensation] from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of [fulfill] the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:25-27)

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the stewardship [dispensation] of God’s grace which was given to me for you; that by

revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations [ages] was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit. (Ephesians 3:1-5)

To me [Paul], the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable [unsearchable] riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages [from the beginning of the world] has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 3:8-10)

How did God reveal His mystery to Paul? He did so through multiple revelations by our risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ to Paul, beginning with his conversion on the road to Damascus where he was headed to imprison the followers of Jesus so as to destroy what was considered to be *the Way* (Acts 9:1-6; 22:14-15; 26:12-18; Galatians 1:11-12; Romans 16:25; II Corinthians 12:1-4; Ephesians 3:1-3). The revelations were so significant that God gave Paul some type of *thorn in the flesh* to remind Paul to keep from exulting himself for receiving the revelations (II Corinthians 12:5-10).

Specific Aspects of the Mystery

Through this revelation of the mystery to Paul, we learn that Paul was the dispenser of God's gospel of grace (Acts 20:24) just as Moses was the dispenser of God's law. God spoke to Paul through the resurrected and glorified Lord Jesus Christ, and to Moses as Jehovah (who apparently was Christ). Therefore, our Lord Jesus Christ revealed both prophecy and the mystery.

Furthermore, the mystery fulfilled the word of God (Colossians 1:25-27). From the beginning of Genesis until Paul (his ministry as recorded in Acts and in his letters Romans through Philemon), and from Hebrews through Revelation, the word of God describes His earthly plans and program. God's earthly program points to a heavenly kingdom on earth where Israel will be the chosen nation and His Son will reign as Messiah and King. The prophecies in the book of Revelation fill in the details of what was already spoken by the prophets since the world began, and completes the word of God concerning His earthly kingdom (Revelation 22:18-19).

The revelation of the mystery through Paul concerns God's heavenly program, which is an administration or dispensation He kept secret in Himself since before the world began. Through it, we have the full story of what God has chosen to reveal about His eternal plan that is described as the manifold (bringing everything together; multifaceted) wisdom of God (Ephesians 3:8-11). The mystery completes the word of God by revealing what God had intended from the beginning: everything He had planned through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

This mystery includes the following specific aspects or components of revelation, which are briefly described in this study:

- The mystery of the church—the body of Christ (and the mystery of Christ)
- The mystery of the wisdom of God
- The mystery of the gospel (and the mystery of the faith)
- The mystery of Israel’s blindness
- The mystery of being caught up and changed (the rapture)
- The mystery of lawlessness
- The mystery of godliness
- The mystery of God’s will (the fullness of times)

The Mystery of the Church—the Body of Christ (and the Mystery of Christ)

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and He is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: for we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:22-32 [KJV])

The greatest or most profound aspect of the revelation of the mystery is that Christ is the head of the church, which is His body. In this passage Paul likens our relationship with Christ to God’s intended relationship between a husband and wife. We are one with Christ but He is the head, and a husband should love his own wife as his own body just as Christ loves the members of His body.

So, what is a church? The Greek word translated as church is *ekklesia*, which means congregation or called-out assembly. The people of Israel who escaped from Egypt were referred to as a church in the wilderness (Acts 7:37-38). Jesus referred to the believers who followed Him during His ministry on earth, as well as those of the future kingdom during His reign as King, as a church (Matthew 16:18; 18:15-17). In four instances Paul references a church in a person’s house (Romans 16:5; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). A church, therefore, is not considered by God to be a building or an organization, but a group of people.

It is commonly taught that the church started at Pentecost; however, no church started at Pentecost. Following Peter’s proclamation of Israel’s guilt in the crucifixion of Christ, several thousand people were added to an existing church when they repented for killing their Messiah and were baptized (Acts 2:37-42). This covenant church, or called-out assembly, was composed of Jews and Jewish proselytes (Gentiles who became as Jews by submitting to the Law of Moses) who believed the gospel of

the kingdom preached by John the Baptist, Christ, and the twelve apostles.² It was to this little flock (Luke 12:32; Acts 1:15) that about 3,000 believers were added on the day of Pentecost and even more during subsequent days (Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14).

Through Paul we learn that the church of today is the body of Christ, with Christ as the head, and that it is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles without distinction. In fact, members of the body of Christ are no longer considered to be Jews or Gentiles—our physical heritage has no meaning or significance to God. Contrary to those at Pentecost who were saved by repentance and baptism for the remission of sins, members of the body of Christ (us) are saved by believing the gospel of salvation: that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again for our justification and righteousness (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Romans 4:23 – 5:11). Brethren, this is a significant difference and is explained in Paul's letters as part of the revelation of the mystery.

And He [God] put all things in subjection under His [Christ's] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:22-23)

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks [Gentiles], whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (I Corinthians 12:12-13)

There is neither Jew nor Greek [Gentile], there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

For He Himself [Christ] is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

The mystery of the body of Christ, I believe, is also referred to as *the mystery of Christ*. The fact that Christ is in us and we are in Christ is a blessing that was not known by, or applicable to, believers before He revealed it to Paul. Also, it was through Paul and his testimony that the apostles and prophets learned of the mystery of Christ (Acts 15:1-22; Galatians 2:1-9; Ephesians 3:4-5; II Peter 3:14-16).

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the stewardship [dispensation] of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations [ages] was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the

² See my study **Which Gospel?** for an examination of the gospel of the kingdom and the other gospels in Scripture.

gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God's grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. (Ephesians 3:1-7)

The passages above demonstrate why the mystery of the church is the greatest aspect of the mystery. We see that it was God's plan from the beginning to reconcile the world to Himself through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ. In revealing this mystery, we (believers) learn the following truths about Christ's accomplishment for us at the cross and our relationship with God—truths hidden in God until He revealed them through Paul.

- Jesus Christ was raised from the dead by the power of God, who seated our resurrected and glorified Lord at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion (Ephesians 1:19-21).
- Personal salvation in this dispensation of grace occurs when we believe the gospel of salvation—that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again—and that it is by faith alone, apart from any kind of works that were previously required by God (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- All people were condemned by sin and, therefore, all people who believe the gospel of salvation—whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, or slave or free—are one in Christ without distinction (Romans 10:12; I Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:16).
- Upon believing the gospel of salvation God made us members of Christ's body—we are in Christ and He is in us (I Corinthians 12:12-13, 27; Romans 8:1, 9-11; 12:4-5; Colossians 1:27).
- At the moment of belief in the gospel we were baptized³ by the Holy Spirit into Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit—our salvation is secure and nothing can separate us from the love of God (I Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:13-14; Romans 8:31-39).
- Because we are in Christ, we are seated with Him at the right hand of God (Ephesians 2:4-6). As such, we are citizens of heaven and Christ's ambassadors on earth (Philippians 3:20-21; II Corinthians 5:20).
- The Law of Moses (including the Ten Commandments), which was the old covenant given to Israel, not only separated Jews from Gentiles, but proved to separate all people from God because it is righteous and we are not (Galatians 3:10-13; II Corinthians 3:4-6). The Law condemned not only God's covenant nation, but everyone. However, when Christ died on the cross, the Law was figuratively and effectively nailed with Him—it was taken out of the way (Colossians 2:13-14; Romans 3:19-26; 8:3).⁴ Therefore, there is no longer any difference between Jews and Gentiles or any barrier between God and man (Ephesians 2:14-16).

If the church, which is the body of Christ, did not start at Pentecost, when did it start? The mystery of the church was first revealed to Paul, so it follows that Paul was the first member of the body of

³ This baptism is a spiritual baptism, or identification, performed by the Holy Spirit. It is not water baptism and is not to be represented by water baptism—it is the *one baptism* referred to in Ephesians 4:5. Also, it is different than the baptism referred to by John the Baptist, who said that Christ would baptize with the Holy Spirit that resulted in the believer receiving the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:4-5; 2:1-4). See my study **Should We Be Baptized?** for more information on the various baptisms in Scripture and which one applies today.

⁴ See my study **The Law of Moses** that describes the Law and its purpose.

Christ. In I Timothy 1:12-17 Paul described himself as the foremost, or chief, of sinners who was saved not only by the mercy and grace of God but as an example for all subsequent believers. Paul's salvation was different than that of the other apostles and disciples before him in that he was not presented with the gospel of the kingdom and was not told to repent and be baptized to be saved.⁵ Because of the miracles that followed, Paul likely was saved on that road to Damascus the moment he believed what the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ said to him (Acts 9:1-18; 22:6-16).

Consider what it takes to become a member of the church, which is the body of Christ. All that is required is to believe that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. We are saved by the grace of God through faith in Christ's work at the cross for us, apart from any works of righteousness of our own (Ephesians 2:8-9). Consider, then, what is required to join churches today. All denominational and most independent churches have certain requirements beyond faith to become a member, such as some specific form of water baptism, completion of classes on denominational or church doctrine, interview and approval by the pastor or the church board, etc. Some denominations and churches do not even require that a person profess faith in the gospel of salvation. It is disconcerting that more is required to join an organized church than to become a member of the body of Christ. Unfortunately, Christianity has added unscriptural requirements just as the spiritual leaders of Israel added to or changed the Law of Moses to suit their needs or desires.

The Mystery of the Wisdom of God

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages [world] to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (I Corinthians 2:6-8)

The fact that God is wiser than mankind or any person is not a mystery. God's wisdom is different than our wisdom. In the Scripture preceding the above passage, Paul demonstrates that human wisdom was not sufficient to know God. Although Christ was in their midst as one of their own, the Jews did not recognize Him because they continually looked for miraculous signs (I Corinthians 1:22; John 1:11; 4:48; Mark 8:11-12). Unfortunately, Israel's history showed that they did not believe God despite all the signs from God that they witnessed. Just as ineffectually, the rest of us (Gentiles) have a long history of seeking after wisdom—our own wisdom—to elevate ourselves to, or to appease, the god(s) of our imagination (Colossians 2:16-23). Where has it gotten us?

The revelation of the mystery (and the gospel of the grace of God) is based on Christ's complete and all-sufficient work at the cross for us—His death, burial, and resurrection to remove the penalty for our sin and to make us alive in Christ. Paul refers to the message regarding this work as the preaching (or word) of the cross, and it is what he emphasized above all else (I Corinthians 1:18; 2:1-5). However, this

⁵ Paul was baptized, but only because that is all Ananias knew to do—it was required by God. However, it occurred *after* Paul miraculously regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit instead of before as established under the gospel of the kingdom (Mark 16:15-18; Acts 2:38).

message about the work of Christ was a stumbling block to the Jews because they would not admit that they killed their Messiah and desired, instead, to attain their righteousness through the Law of Moses (Romans 9:30-33). And this message was, and continues to be, considered foolishness by the Gentiles because it is nonsense (unnatural) to think someone would die for his enemy (Romans 5:6-10). To us who believe, however, it is the power of God and the reason for our salvation (I Corinthians 1:18-31). What part of all this demonstrates the mystery of the wisdom of God?

Brethren, God is sovereign. We are subject to His will—He is not subject to our will (Job 23:13; Psalm 33:8-11; Proverbs 16:9; 19:21; 21:30; Isaiah 14:27; Daniel 4:35; Romans 9: 14-21; Ephesians 1:11; Philippians 2:13). Through Paul we understand that this mystery concerning our Lord's work at the cross was God's plan from the very beginning—it was not an afterthought, or *Plan B*, in reaction to our sinfulness. Because of His wisdom, God already knew beforehand that, given a choice, mankind would choose to worship the creation instead of the Creator. Mankind did as expected (and continues to do so), and God gave them over to sin (Romans 1:18-32). Because of the sinfulness of the nations, and according to His plan, God raised up a new nation (Israel) and gave them His law and ordinances (the Law of Moses). However, as God knew would occur beforehand, the people of Israel proved their humanity and disobeyed the Law while trying to attain their own righteousness through the Law—they were not following the Law by faith (Jeremiah 31:32; Acts 7:52-53; Romans 2:23-24). Even when God sent His own Son to His people Israel, they rejected and crucified Him (John 1:11; Acts 2:22-23), exactly as prophesied. Consequently, all of mankind, both Jews and Gentiles, proved to be unrighteous (Romans 3:9-18), just as God knew we would before He made us.

Therefore, even before the world began, God planned to provide a remedy for our sin through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ at the cross. Everyone, whether Jew or Gentile, who believes that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again (the gospel of salvation— I Corinthians 15:1-4), is an adopted child of God (Romans 8:14-17) and is a member of the body of Christ. The revelation of this eternal plan of God—the mystery—ties the whole Bible together. Without the revelation of the mystery through Paul, Gentiles could not approach God without becoming a Jewish proselyte and would have no hope in becoming one with Christ. Additionally, the fate of everyone (Jew and Gentile) would rest on our own futile works of righteousness (see Romans 3:10) instead of Christ's righteousness. The mystery, therefore, presents the *manifold* wisdom of God—it is the key information that makes everything work together and actually fulfills or completes the word of God (Colossians 1:25-27).

To me [Paul], the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable [unsearchable] riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration [fellowship] of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:8-11)

It was because of God's eternal purpose through the work of Christ at the cross that anyone could, or can, have fellowship with God and be counted as righteous; that is, saved from the eternal consequences of sin. From Adam forward, until Christ's saving work at the cross was revealed through

Paul, people were saved by the future work of Christ even though they did not know this. Prior to the Law of Moses, people were saved by believing what God told them (directly as Jehovah or through prophets, angels, visions, and dreams). For example, Noah believed what God told him and obediently built an ark (Genesis 6:13-22), and Abraham believed God when he was told that he would be the father of countless descendants and many nations (Romans 4:3; Genesis 15:1-6; 17:1-7). These men continued to sin, so how were they saved? Unknown to them, God imputed the future saving work of Christ on them because of their faith. Under the Law of Moses, which was in full effect until the gospel of grace was revealed to us through Paul,⁶ a person's (a Jew's or Jewish proselyte's) faith was demonstrated by humbly submitting to the Law of Moses as God commanded (Romans 9:30-32). In other words, salvation was by faith plus works as explained in the following *mystery of the gospel*.

Paul said that not many wise, mighty, or noble people are saved (I Corinthians 1:26-28). If the wisest people on earth are not wise enough to understand the preaching of the cross, how is it that anyone can understand these things? It is by faith that we believe the truth of God, and it is the Holy Spirit of God who enables us to believe (Romans 10:17; Ephesians 1:13-14; II Thessalonians 2:13-14). Because we (believers) have the Holy Spirit in us, we are able to comprehend the things of God—things that those who are not saved cannot understand and actually consider to be foolish (I Corinthians 2:10-16).⁷

That God chooses the lowliest things to confound the wisest people of this world (I Corinthians 1:26-29) was demonstrated when Jesus chose his twelve disciples. None of the twelve were considered to be men of prestige or wisdom (Acts 4:13), with one even being a despised tax collector for the Roman government (Matthew 9:9-13). Yet when these men (excluding Judas who was replaced by Matthias according to God's will) were filled with the Holy Spirit, the people were truly amazed (Acts 2:5-13). However, prior to his salvation Paul was a man of prestige—he was highly educated, a leader among the Jews, and a Pharisee. His lofty position, though, did not enable him to believe the gospel of salvation and all the things that Christ would reveal to him. Just like all other believers, Paul believed the truth of God because the Holy Spirit enabled him to do so. Furthermore, he admitted that everything he had going for him prior to his salvation was worthless compared to what he gained in Christ (Philippians 3:4-11). So, whether we are considered to be lowly or prestigious in this world, we have no room to boast in our knowledge or wisdom of the things of God because our salvation is by the grace of God—His gift to us—and our understanding is through the Holy Spirit instead of our own wisdom (Ephesians

⁶ The Law remained in effect for a time after Paul's salvation among the remaining kingdom believers (Acts 21:17-20) because keeping the Law of Moses was part of the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 23:1-3; 28:19-20).

⁷ Not everyone is sanctified by the Holy Spirit, which is why not everyone believes the truth of salvation. Brethren, God is sovereign, and it is He who chooses us, instead of us choosing Him (Ephesians 1:3-6; II Thessalonians 2:13; Galatians 4:9; John 1:12-13; 5:21; 6:37, 44; Romans 9:14-24); otherwise, no one would be saved. In our natural unsaved condition, we are not only enemies of God, but we are dead in sin (Romans 5:6-10; Ephesians 2:1-3)—those who are dead cannot choose life. Furthermore, by only having the spirit of man in us prior to salvation, by nature we are unable to understand or choose the things of God—*free will* chooses only according to that sinful nature. Salvation is truly by the grace of God, for which we ought to be thankful and for which there is no room for boasting. Please think on these things. See my study **Salvation and the Sovereignty of God** for more on this subject.

1:15-21). The only boasting we should do, therefore, is in God and our Lord Jesus Christ for what they have done (I Corinthians 1:30-31; II Corinthians 10:17-18).

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

The Mystery of the Gospel (and the Mystery of the Faith)

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my [Paul's] behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:18-20)

Paul referred to his message as the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24), which was in accordance with the revelation of the mystery. This gospel, which he called *my gospel* because he was chosen by God to dispense it to mankind (Romans 16:25; II Timothy 2:8; Ephesians 1:1; 3:1-7), included not only the gospel of salvation but also all aspects of the mystery.⁸ It differed greatly from the gospel of the kingdom preached by John the Baptist, Jesus while He was on earth, and the twelve apostles (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14).

Now to Him [God] who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past [since the world began]. (Romans 16:25)

Of this church I [Paul] was made a minister according to the stewardship [dispensation] from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of [fulfill] the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Colossians 1:25-27)

The good news of the kingdom was that Israel's long-promised heavenly kingdom on earth was at hand, or imminent. All Israel had to do was repent for their disobedience to God and be baptized for the remissions of their sins, and believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah and Son of God (Matthew 3:1-2; 10:5-7; 16:15-16; 28:19-20; Mark 16:16). As evidence of their faith, the believers were to obey the Law of Moses (Matthew 23:1-3) and sell all their possessions (Matthew 19:21; Acts 2:44-45). Salvation, therefore, was obtained through a combination of faith *plus* works. Although some believed, the people of Israel demanded that Jesus be crucified. Consequently, at Pentecost, there was no good news of salvation. Instead, Peter accused the people of Israel of killing their Messiah and it was for this reason

⁸ Paul's overall message was *the mystery*, which included *the gospel of the grace of God*. Additionally, the gospel of the grace of God included *the gospel of salvation* through Christ. These components were based on, and completely intertwined by, the redemptive work of Christ at the cross according to God's eternal purpose.

(as well as their disobedience to God in general) that they needed to repent before Christ would return to establish His kingdom on earth (Acts 2:22-23, 36-38; 3:19-26).

Through Paul, God revealed His gospel of grace. During this time, referred to as the dispensation of the grace of God (Ephesians 3:2), we have a relationship with God through the merits of Christ's work at the cross. We are no longer under the judicial administration of the Law of Moses—we were condemned by its righteous requirement, so it was nailed to the cross with Christ (Romans 6:14; II Corinthians 3:6; Galatians 3:11-13; Colossians 2: 13-14). Furthermore, we (Jews and Gentiles without distinction) are not accused of being guilty of crucifying Christ; instead, His death, burial, and resurrection are presented as good news. Today, therefore, salvation is by the grace of God through faith *apart* from any works of righteousness (Ephesians 2:8-9). Do you think that Satan would have been so anxious to have Jesus killed if he had known that His work at the cross would have resulted in victory over sin and death—and his ultimate demise (I Corinthians 15:55-57; Revelation 20:10), and righteousness for all who believe (Romans 5:17-21; II Corinthians 5:21)?

Apostle Paul testified of the gospel of the grace of God, but also called it the gospel of God (Romans 1:1; II Corinthians 11:7), and much more often referred to it as the gospel of Christ (e.g., Romans 1:9; 15:19; I Corinthians 9:12; II Corinthians 2:12). Paul's references to the gospel of the glory of Christ (II Corinthians 4:4) and the gospel of the uncircumcision (Galatians 2:7) are other descriptive names of the gospel of grace. The gospel of peace (Romans 10:15; Ephesians 6:15) is yet another name for the gospel of grace.⁹ The good news of Paul's message had been hidden in God and has no connection with the gospel of Israel's promised kingdom.¹⁰

Paul also mentions the *mystery of the faith*. This appears to be associated with the mystery of the gospel, because the gospel of the grace of God encompasses or describes what Paul refers to as *the faith* (Romans 1:5; 10:8-10; Galatians 1:22-23; 6:10; Ephesians 4:5, 13; I Timothy 1:2; II Timothy 4:7). God bridged the righteous gap between Himself and us on the basis of Christ's faithfulness¹¹ (His work at the cross). On a personal level, we cannot obtain the blessings of Christ's work for us without faith (belief) in the gospel of salvation (Ephesians 1:13-14; 2:8-9).

Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. (I Timothy 3:8-9)

⁹ See my study **Which Gospel?** for a fuller explanation of the gospel of the grace of God.

¹⁰ Paul never preached the gospel of the kingdom. However, he explained why God interrupted His prophetic plan for Israel in Romans 9 – 11.

¹¹ Where most translations say "faith *in* Christ" in Romans 3:22, Galatians 2:16 and 20, Galatians 3:22-25, Ephesians 3:12, and Philippians 3:9, these passages appear to be speaking of the faith *of* Christ, referring to His faithfulness to God by performing His work at the cross for us instead of our faith in that work. In these instances, the KJV appears to be the correct rendering.

The Mystery of Israel's Blindness

For I [Paul] do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening [blindness] has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (Romans 11:25)

Because of the exceeding sinfulness of the nations, God raised up a nation to Himself through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (who was also called Israel). Although living as slaves in Egypt, God brought His people of Israel out of Egypt through many miracles wrought by the hand of His servant Moses. Later, while in the wilderness, through Moses He gave His law and ordinances (later called the Law of Moses in Scripture) to the people. Then, He gave the people their own land that He had promised to them. God provided prophets to the people to hold them accountable to the Law and to reveal His future plans for the nation. God then sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Messiah (His Son Jesus Christ) to His people, and finally the witness of His Holy Spirit (beginning at Pentecost) to testify of God's power. What was Israel's response to all these blessings from God?

Stephen, a disciple who had been falsely accused of preaching against the Law of Moses, was brought before the High Priest and members of the Jewish Sanhedrin (religious council) to explain and defend himself. Speaking under the control of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:10, 15), Stephen proceeded to provide the council with a brief but convicting history of Israel beginning with Abraham (Acts 7). Stephen accused Israel of rejecting the Law of Moses, killing God's prophets, and murdering Christ, the prophesied *Righteous One* (Acts 7:52-53). The council became very mad at Stephen for saying these things but reached a breaking point when he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and said that he saw the Son of Man (Jesus Christ) standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:54-56). They then took Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. In this account, therefore, we see that the nation of Israel rejected God the Father by killing His prophets, God the Son by crucifying Jesus, and God the Holy Spirit by stoning Stephen.

According to the Old Testament prophecies, what should have happened next? Israel's rejection of God was foretold by the prophets, which was to be followed by God's cleansing of Israel (judgment followed by redemption), Satan's world rule through his representatives (referred to as *the beast* and *the false prophet*), God's judgments on the nations and the earth, Christ's triumphant return to earth at the end of *the great tribulation*, and the establishment of God's heavenly kingdom on earth with Christ as King (Acts 2:14-21; Zechariah 13:1 – 14:21). However, none of this has happened yet. Why? When will the prophetic program resume? It will resume when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, which will be addressed later in this study.

Instead of judging Israel and the nations, God revealed His secret plan about Christ's work at the cross and ushered in His dispensation of grace through Apostle Paul. The prophetic program was interrupted and is still waiting to resume in due time. Concurrently with the revelation of the mystery, God temporarily blinded (hardened) the nation and set it aside. This act of grace is to the benefit of the Gentiles and Jews of this dispensation. Even though the nation of Israel is blinded to the truths of God, there is no longer any spiritual difference between Jews and Gentiles, so individual Jews and Gentiles

have equal access to God and become equal members of the body of Christ if they believe the gospel of salvation.

Ushering in the dispensation of grace with the salvation of Paul (which followed not long after the stoning of Stephen¹²) would seem to be the time that God effectively blinded Israel and set the nation aside. However, we see in the book of Acts that Paul preached in synagogues in Gentile cities, and that the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem were still zealous for keeping the Law of Moses for some time after Paul's salvation and his ministry had begun (Acts 21:17-21). Perhaps to avoid future speculation that the Jews residing outside of Israel might not have had a fair chance to believe that Jesus was their promised Messiah, God used Paul to deliver the message to them.

Because of Paul's intense desire for his fellow countrymen to be saved (Romans 9:1-5), combined with the revelation of God's hidden plan, it was Paul's custom to teach at the local synagogues first as he entered each Gentile city (Acts 17:1-3). Although some Jews believed Paul's message about who Christ was (which he could do by referencing the Law of Moses and the Prophets) and about God's grace, including leaders of at least one synagogue (Acts 18:8), the congregations as a whole rejected Paul's message. Consequently, he frustratingly proclaimed that, because of their unbelief, the word of God was going to the Gentiles (Acts 13:44-48; 18:5-6; 28:23-28). Paul may not have been fully aware at the time how God was using him to fulfill His plan to set Israel aside (perhaps he was, however).

Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you [Jews] first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles." (Acts 13:46)

Scripture does not say exactly when God fully set Israel aside, so it must not be important for us to know. The record in Acts (see also Galatians 2:1-9) demonstrates, however, an overlapping period of time where the gospel of the kingdom (also called the gospel of the circumcision¹³) continued to be preached to the Jews in Jerusalem and surrounding areas by the twelve apostles and other kingdom disciples at the same time that Paul and his coworkers were teaching the gospel of the grace of God (also called the gospel of the uncircumcision) in the Gentile cities and nations.

¹² Paul, known as Saul at the time, was at least an active witness to the stoning of Steven and, therefore, most likely witnessed Stephen's defense. We do not know if he actually threw stones (it does not matter), but we do know that he was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death (Acts 7:58; 8:1).

¹³ Most Bible versions say "the gospel *to* the uncircumcision [*Gentiles*]" and "gospel *to* the circumcision [*Jews*]" in Galatians 2:7. This translation implies that the same gospel was preached to both the Gentiles and the Jews. However, Paul was entrusted with the gospel of the grace of God to Jews and Gentiles without distinction in the Gentile nations (as God's appointed apostle of the Gentiles—Romans 11:13) while Peter was entrusted with the gospel of the kingdom to the Jews in Israel (see Matthew 16:17-19)—the two gospels are not the same. Therefore, the KJV translation of "the gospel *of* the uncircumcision" and "the gospel *of* the circumcision" correctly fits the context.

Many Christian denominations and individual believers have exhibited contempt for Jews, and some share responsibility for the terrible persecution of Jews over the last two millennia.¹⁴ This is utterly wrong and most definitely contrary to the will of God. Paul explained to the believers in Rome (and, by extension, all members of the body of Christ), that God has not permanently cast aside the people of Israel—they were His chosen nation and God will fulfill all His promises to them (Romans 11:1-2, 11-12, 26-29). The nation was hardened because of its unbelief, but God will restore the nation to Himself. Furthermore, there is no room for boasting by believers today because we were adopted as children of God, whereas the believers of Israel were children of God before us (Romans 8:14-17; 11:15-18). In fact, it was through the nation's disbelief that we have received the gospel of grace and are reconciled to God (Romans 11:11-12). We are warned, however, that we can fall into disobedience as easily as Israel did (Romans 11:19-22). In other words, we should be careful how we stand for God and our Lord Jesus Christ lest we, too, should fall.

For some clarification, Israel was already blind to the truth of God when Jesus ministered to the nation. This condition was prophesied (Isaiah 6:9-10; Matthew 13:14-15; John 12:37-40). However, in accordance with prophecy, Israel will subsequently return to God and be restored. Through all this God was, and in the future will be, dealing directly with His nation of Israel. Even when Israel was prophetically blind, however, some individuals did see the truth by the grace of God (Matthew 13:16-17) and the nation was exhorted to repent and turn to God.

The mystery of Israel's blindness or hardening, however, has to do with interrupting the prophetic progression of events so that God could reveal His hidden plan for the Gentiles completely apart from the blessings of Israel. The opportunity for Israel to turn to God is no longer available or possible during this dispensation of grace. The promises regarding Israel's restoration as God's people will occur after this dispensation is fulfilled (Romans 11:25-29). The role of Israel today in God's prophetic plan will be addressed later in this study.

Although there are no types (figurative or foreshadowing examples) of the church (the body of Christ) in the Old Testament because God kept it a secret, there certainly are parallels between Israel and the church. We seem to be no less obstinate and disobedient than Israel was. Paul's letters to the Corinthian and the Galatian brethren confirm this (I Corinthians 3:1-3; Galatians 3:1-3), as do the actions of many denominations and believers today. We are told that Israel's sinful behavior and disobedience is an example so that we would avoid such things and actually live in obedience to God (I Corinthians 10:1-12). You are encouraged to prayerfully read Romans chapters 9 through 11 to gain a greater understanding of the setting aside of Israel and the resulting benefit to us.

¹⁴ History suggests or supports that this persecution is a result of "Christianity" blaming the Jews for killing Jesus. Although God holds Israel responsible for killing its Messiah, the Roman authorities actually carried it out. Consequently, the Gentiles were complicit in Israel's sin and are in no position to judge the Jews (Acts 4:27).

The Mystery of Being Caught Up and Changed (the Rapture)

Behold, I [Paul] tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep [physically die], but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. (I Corinthians 15:51-52)

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep [physically dead], so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. (I Thessalonians 4:13-17)

Did you know that there are two returns of Christ spoken of in Scripture? One is in accordance with God's prophetic plan, and the other is in accordance with His secret (hidden) plan—the mystery. There are parallels between both returns, but each return is for a significantly different purpose.

There is much confusion among Christian denominations and individual believers about the *second coming of Christ*. Most think of the second coming as our Lord's physical return to earth as our Lord spoke of while He was on earth and as explained in the book of Revelation. The coming of the *Son of Man* to render judgment at the end of the great tribulation was revealed by the Old Testament prophets (Daniel 7:13-14; Zechariah 14:4). Jesus spoke of His return in veiled terms to His disciples who, based on their actions after the crucifixion, did not understand what Jesus was saying until He opened their eyes to understanding after He rose from the dead (Matthew 16:27-28; 24:29-31; Luke 21:25-28; 24:25-27, 44-45). Two angels of God confirmed this to the disciples at Christ's ascension (Acts 1:9-11), as did Peter to the people of Israel after Pentecost (Acts 3:19-21).

Some key points to know concerning the prophesied second coming of Christ is that He will return in power to defeat the enemies of God and of Israel (Zechariah 12:8-9; Revelation 14:14-20; 19:11-16), He will set foot on the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:4; Acts 1:11-12), and He will establish His kingdom on earth. Christ will rule from New Jerusalem as King of His people Israel and as the King of kings of the earth, and the resurrected twelve apostles (not including Paul) will sit on the twelve thrones of Israel (Matthew 19:28; Ezekiel 37: 24-28; Revelation 21:1-27). Furthermore, of significant importance, the believers who survive the great tribulation and enter into the kingdom, as well as the resurrected believers who had died with this kingdom hope (all believers since Adam other than the members of the body of Christ saved during this dispensation of grace) will have bodies of flesh (Isaiah 65:17-25; Ezekiel 36:25-26; Luke 24:36-43). They will have one nature that is sinless and is fully obedient to God's laws and ordinances—the Law of Moses will be written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:26-28).

The mystery regarding Christ's return revealed by Paul, however, has nothing to do with the prophetic second coming of Christ. This aspect of the mystery, commonly referred to as *the rapture* (it is

not called as such in Scripture), has been debated at length among Christian denominations and brethren for some time. The debate has included who will be raptured, when it will occur (pre-tribulation, mid-tribulation, or post-tribulation), and whether it will happen at all. These questions arise because most believers do not recognize the importance and distinctiveness of Paul's apostleship and message—he was chosen by God to dispense the revelation of the mystery and the gospel of grace. They do not realize that the rapture was only spoken of by Paul in his letters because it was a part of God's hidden plan (the mystery) until revealed through Paul—no other books of the Bible describe, refer to, or even hint at the rapture.

So, what did Paul say about this event?

- His letters describing the event were written to members of the body of Christ, that is, believers in this dispensation of grace. His letters were not written directly to believers of Israel (those saved under the gospel of the kingdom) who had, and will have, an earthly kingdom hope.
- Believers who are alive at the time of the rapture will be instantly changed. Their bodies will be changed from flesh and blood to spiritual bodies (I Corinthians 15:51-53). Believers of this dispensation of grace who died prior to the rapture will be resurrected with spiritual bodies (I Corinthians 15:35-50). Our bodies will be transformed so as to conform with the body of Christ's glory (Philippians 3:20-21). Compare this to the kingdom believers who will have bodies of flesh and blood as previously noted.
- All believers of this dispensation of grace are already citizens of heaven because we are seated in Christ who is presently at the right hand of God. We will fully attain our position in the heavenly places in Christ upon death or the rapture (Philippians 3:20-21).
- Believers caught up at the rapture will meet the Lord *in the air* (I Thessalonians 4:15-17). Paul does not say that we will come right back down to the earth. He never speaks of members of the body of Christ as going through the time of great tribulation or being on earth as part of Israel's promised kingdom during Christ's 1,000-year reign.
- Paul refers to this event as our blessed hope (Titus 2:11-13). We should look forward to it with certainty and comfort (I Thessalonians 4:18).
- Paul says that we (members of the body of Christ) are not destined for wrath (I Thessalonians 5:4-11). This time of wrath refers to God's judgments on the nations and the earth during the time of great tribulation (Matthew 24:21-24; Daniel 9:27; Revelation 13:1-8). It may also include the time of God's judgments on the nation of Israel during the resumption of the prophesied *last days* following the rapture (Zechariah 13:7-9; Ezekiel 36:24-25).
- The rapture will occur at the close of this dispensation of grace, at which time the prophesied last days will resume. Scripture does not say when this will happen, but Paul describes the declining nature of mankind during the last days of this dispensation (I Timothy 4:1-3; II Timothy 3:1-5; 4:3-4). These conditions, as bad as they are, have no relation to the events described by the Prophets and in the book of Revelation. However, the nature of mankind described by Paul was already prevalent in his day, so it can be truthfully said that the rapture has been imminent since it was revealed by Paul. In other words, no prophesied events must occur before the rapture occurs—it could happen any day.

- God will announce the descending of Christ out of heaven to gather (catch) up the members of His body with the voice of God's archangel and the sound of the trumpet of God (I Thessalonians 4:16). Similarly, God will sound a trumpet to send out His angels to gather His chosen ones scattered throughout the land when Christ returns in power and glory at the close of the great tribulation (Matthew 24:3, 29-31). These are two separate events (the first associated with the mystery and the second with prophecy), but neither of these soundings of the trumpet are related to the seven trumpets of the seven angels described in the book of Revelation. Although it is conjecture, it is possible that the voice and trumpet announcing the rapture will be heard only by believers because the world during this dispensation is blinded (and deaf?) to the truth of God (Romans 8:7; I Corinthians 2:14).

In summary, the event we call the rapture was spoken of only by Paul because it was part of God's mystery. It will involve only the members of the body of Christ in this dispensation of grace. Believers who are alive at the time of the rapture, and the resurrected bodies of those who died beforehand, will be changed so as to have spiritual bodies so that we can reside in the heavenly places. The rapture will occur at the close of this dispensation of grace, at which time the prophesied last days and all the events associated with them will resume.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. (Titus 2:11-13)

The Mystery of Lawlessness

For the mystery of lawlessness [iniquity] is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. (II Thessalonians 2:7)

False teachers had tried to deceive the Thessalonian believers by saying that the rapture had already occurred (II Thessalonians 2:1-4). So, Paul briefly summarized what he had explained to them in person about the sequence of coming events (II Thessalonians 2:5-12). Basically, he said that if the rapture had occurred, then the lawless one (the beast) would already be working in their midst, which was not the case. However, he did say that the mystery of lawlessness was already at work. In what way was it already at work?

Although the beast and the false prophet (an antichrist—I John 2:22; II John 1:7) will not be revealed until the last seven years prior to Christ's return to earth, Satan is at work in the world today. Despite this age being the dispensation of God's grace, it is also an evil age (Galatians 1:3-4). Satan and his angels are working in the earthly and heavenly realms in an attempt to thwart God and His people (Ephesians 2:1-3; 6:10-12). Many temptations are thrown before us, even from people who have the appearance of righteousness, to turn us away from our fellowship with God and our service to Him. Satan is currently working in a subtle or veiled manner by imitating God (II Corinthians 11:12-15), whereas during the prophesied last days he will be working more openly, prowling about like a roaring lion (I Peter 5:8). However, we need to remember that, because we are in Christ, no temptation is too

great to deal with, and nothing can separate us from the love of God (I Corinthians 10:13; Romans 8:31-39). Furthermore, we need to remember that we have the strength of God within us to resist Satan and his schemes against us (Ephesians 3:14-19; 6:10-17; Colossians 1:9-12).

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air [*Satan*], of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. (Ephesians 2:1-3)

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:10-12)

Despite the working of Satan today, the scope of his power is restrained or bridled. Restrained by what or whom? II Thessalonians 2:7 appears to be referring to the restraining work of the Holy Spirit. Sometime after the rapture God will remove the restraints holding Satan back (God apparently will take the Holy Spirit out of Satan's way) and he will unleash his evil through the prophesied beast and false prophet. Satan will then be defeated by Christ and thrown into the abyss (bottomless pit) for 1,000 years before being released and subsequently destroyed forever in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:1-3; 7-10).

The Mystery of Godliness

But in case I [*Paul*] am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth. By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory. (I Timothy 3:15-16)

Lawlessness is at work today through the influence of Satan, but so is godliness in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ through the members of His body the church. The person, work, and righteousness of Christ—His godliness—is the subject of this mystery. We cannot live godly lives apart from His godliness. Christ was declared by God to be His Son at His baptism by John (Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:31). Through Paul, we know that Christ was demonstrated to be the Son of God through His resurrection (Romans 1:3-4). Christ had given up His position in heaven to become a man, and He humbled Himself in obedience before the Father by dying for our sins—He died in our place (Philippians 2:5-11; Romans 3:21-26). Not only did Jesus the man represent the complete Godhead (Colossians 2:9-10; John 10:30; 14:8-10), but through the power of His resurrection we are complete in Him—we are counted as righteous because of His righteousness (Romans 4:22-25; 5:17-21). This fact had not been revealed before Paul.

Brethren, we need to remember that before we were saved, we lived according to our inherited sin nature in a life separated from God—we were ungodly (Romans 8:5-8; Ephesians 2:1-3). We were actually enemies of God (Romans 5:10). Thankfully, however, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). Christ died for our sins and, if we believe that, our sins are forgiven (past, present, and future). Does that give us a license to sin? Can we live however we want, as if we were godless, because we are forgiven? No! By doing so completely disregards what Christ did for us at the cross—we become self-centered hypocrites.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:1-2)

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, for the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. (Romans 6:8-13)

It is the power of His resurrection that put Christ above all things and enabled us to be saved and enables us to live godly lives (Ephesians 1:18-23). In this dispensation of grace, we are in Christ and Christ is in us, and the Holy Spirit of God indwells us (Romans 8:1, 9-11). Because of what Christ did for us at the cross, we are blessed with all spiritual blessings (Ephesians 1:3). Is not this something to be truly thankful for? How, then, do we demonstrate our thanks to God and our Lord Jesus Christ? We are exhorted (and have the ability because of the Holy Spirit in us) to live godly lives. We are God's instruments to demonstrate His godliness in this godless world.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age. (Titus 2:11-12)

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (II Corinthians 5:20)

The Mystery of God's Will (the Fullness of Times)

He [*God*] made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him [*Himself*] with a view to an administration [*dispensation*] suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth... (Ephesians 1:9-10)

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep [*physically dead*]. For since by a man [*Adam*] came death, by a man [*Christ*] also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end, when

He [Christ] hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. For He [God] has put all things in subjection under His [Christ's] feet. But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He [God] is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him [Christ]. When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all. (I Corinthians 15:20-28)

The mystery of God's will, which covers the dispensation of the fullness of the times (hereafter referred to as *the fullness of times* as translated in the KJV), very briefly describes the last dispensation in God's eternal plan. God has revealed very little of this time in His plan, but from the passages above we have the following concise summary of events that give us a timeline for when the fullness of times begins, which will continue forever:

- Christ will reign (His 1,000-year Messianic reign on earth) until God has put all His enemies under Christ's feet (I Corinthians 15:25)—they will be completely defeated (Revelation 20:7-10).
- The last enemy that will be abolished is death (I Corinthians 15:26), which occurs at the last judgment (at the great white throne) at the close of the 1,000-year Messianic kingdom (Revelation 20:11-15).
- After all rule, authority, and power (including death) have been abolished, Christ will hand the kingdom over to God the Father (I Corinthians 15:24)—this, apparently, is the beginning of the fullness of times.
- At that time all things in Christ, both in heaven and on earth, will be brought together (Ephesians 1:10).
- All of this was God's plan from the very beginning (Ephesians 1:9).

The information provided in these two passages cannot be found anywhere else in Scripture. God's prophetic plan ends with the judgments at the great white throne; what follows is part of the mystery that God had kept hidden in Himself. Many churches and brethren believe otherwise, thinking that the events recorded in Revelation 21 and 22 describe the time after the final judgments described in Revelation 20:11-15. However, the events of the last two chapters of Revelation do not chronologically follow those recorded in Revelation 20.

As we have seen in the above passages, the dispensation of the fullness of times will begin *after* all rule, authority, and power, including death, are abolished, which will occur at the great white throne judgments. The last two chapters of Revelation, however, describe Christ's Messianic kingdom (where Christ reigns as Israel's Messiah and King) that will occur *before* the final judgments. New Jerusalem—the bride of Christ—will descend out of heaven onto the earth after Christ's victory over the enemies of Israel (Revelation 21:2, 9-10). Christ will be the King, and the resurrected twelve apostles will sit on the twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28). This will indeed be a time of a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1). The configuration of the surface of the earth as we know it will have changed during God's catastrophic judgments of the nations, nature, the earth, and the universe during the great tribulation (Revelation 6:12-17; 8:7-12; 9:13-18)—the reconfiguration will be necessary

because there is no place today for new Jerusalem to fit (Revelation 21:15-16). The descent of new Jerusalem out of heaven will result in some type of reconfiguration of heaven. Furthermore, Paradise (Abraham's bosom), a place somewhere in the heavenlies containing the souls of the kingdom believers, will be emptied as they are resurrected to live in new Jerusalem and reign with Christ as priests of God (Revelation 20:5-6; Exodus 19:5-6; Luke 14:14; John 5:28-29; 11:21-26).

Further evidence that the descent of new Jerusalem will occur before instead of after the final judgments is that the nations outside the city will walk by its light (the miraculous light of Christ), and that sin will continue outside the gates (Revelation 21:24-27; 22:14-15). Christ will reign as the King of kings, and the kings of the surviving nations will pay homage to Him. Those kings and their nations, however, will rise up and make war against Christ and the city at the end of the 1,000-year kingdom (Revelation 20:1-3, 7-10), at which time they will be destroyed and sin and death will be abolished (thrown into the lake of fire) for eternity.

Although usually taught otherwise, the church is not the bride of Christ spoken of in Revelation 21. Brethren, in this dispensation of grace we are members of the body of Christ—Christ is already in us and we are in Him. We cannot be both members of His body (which is masculine) and His future bride. The bride of Christ, furthermore, is explicitly described as *new Jerusalem*, a divine city with specific physical dimensions and contents (Revelation 21:9-21). Christ referred to this city during His ministry on earth (John 14:2). There is no mention of it being inhabited when it descends from heaven—that will not occur until the believers who survive the great tribulation and the resurrected kingdom believers occupy it. Furthermore, the church, which is the body of Christ, is part of the revelation of the mystery to Paul and is not part of God's prophetic program.

So, what will it be like during the dispensation of the fullness of times? Will heaven and earth always be separate? Will the believers of this dispensation reside in heaven forever? God did not reveal the specifics—we will find out when the time comes. God did reveal, however, that all things in Christ, both the things in the heavens and things on the earth, will be summed up or made one. Although Ezekiel spoke specifically of Israel and its promised kingdom, he said that the kingdom would be everlasting (Ezekiel 37:24-28); this was confirmed to Mary by the angel of God (Luke 1:32-33). However, prophecies only describe the first 1,000 years, and only Paul said that Christ will hand the kingdom over to God after the final judgments. Furthermore, remember that the dispensation of the fullness of times is part of the mystery. It is not unreasonable to think, therefore, that redeemed Israel (things on earth) and the body of Christ (things in heaven) will dwell as one on earth after sin and death are abolished. These thoughts are just for consideration; whatever happens, it will be in accordance with God's plan and will be perfect.

Resumption of God's Prophetic Plan

The revelation of the mystery, which we have seen was God's plan since before the world began, interrupted God's prophetic plan regarding Israel (a temporary interruption that continues to this day). When Peter was addressing the people of Israel who lived in or had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, he

and his fellow disciples spoke in a miraculous tongue that everyone—to their amazement—could understand in their own native language (Acts 2:4-12). Peter explained that what the people were witnessing was the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophet Joel's prophecy concerning the last days (Acts 2:14-21). Fulfillment of this specific prophecy would begin with the believers of Israel being controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, which was happening at that very moment. However, the rest of Joel's prophecy (and that of many other prophets) regarding God's judgments and Christ's return did not happen and have yet to happen. We can and should be thankful for the interruption of the prophetic plan because it was for our benefit. Instead of judging Israel and the nations in accordance with His prophetic plan, it was due time for God to reveal His eternal plan and purpose—His secret plan—based on the finished work of Christ at the cross.

Many brethren who correctly think that the rapture will occur before the great tribulation, also think that Christ will return to establish His kingdom seven years after the rapture. Some also logically assume, then, that He will return less than seven years after the rapture because Peter said that Joel's account of the last days actually started at Pentecost and that the prophetic clock was interrupted some specific time shortly after Pentecost. What is generally not understood, however, is that the prophesied tribulation period is only one phase of the prophesied *last days*; that is, the beginning of fulfillment of Joel's prophecy did not represent the beginning of the tribulation period.

Prophetic Last Days

As a note of caution, one could spend a considerable amount of time trying to decipher all the references pertaining to the last days. However, it is doubtful that anyone will understand them all and figure out how they all interrelate in time until the prophecies are actually fulfilled. Furthermore, it is not important for us (members of the body of Christ in this dispensation of grace) to understand all the details because we will not be involved in the fulfillment of the prophetic last days. An attempt will be made, however, to provide some information for the purposes of distinguishing between prophecy and the mystery, in a manner that Paul did for the Thessalonian brethren who were being confused and deceived by false teachers (I Thessalonians 5:1-11; II Thessalonians 2:1-12).

If one looks up Scripture references describing the last days, latter days, and similar time-descriptive terms, there is much more to the last days than a tribulation period. According to what has been revealed in Scripture, therefore, the prophesied last days include the following events (as well as many more not described here).

- Christ the Messiah will be born, will minister to Israel, will be crucified, and will be resurrected (Hebrews 1:1-3). Prophecies concerning these things have already been fulfilled as we know and as described in the section **Prophecy—Since the World Began**.
- The prophet Elijah will prepare the way for Israel's Messiah (Malachi 4:4-6). This was fulfilled through the ministry of John the Baptist.¹⁵

¹⁵ John the Baptist denied that he was Elijah, which is true because he was John, born of Zacharias and Elizabeth (John 1:21-25; Luke 1:5-17). However, Jesus said that John the Baptist was the prophet Elijah who was to come (Matthew 11:7-14; 17:9-13; Mark 1:2-4; Malachi 3:1). It appears, then, that the prophecy about Elijah was referring

- The Holy Spirit will descend upon God’s people as a witness to the power of God (Joel 2:28-29). This was fulfilled, at least partially, at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-17).
- Israel will be judged and redeemed by God. The timing and order of these restoration events are uncertain to me, but they, and the remaining events that follow, still await fulfillment.
 - Israel will be gathered into its promised land as God’s chosen nation—the twelve tribes will be restored as one nation (Ezekiel 37:15-23; Micah 2:12-13). This event appears to be the beginning of the first phase of fulfillment of the kingdom promises sometime after the rapture.
 - The people of Israel will be judged for their disobedience to God, and the nation will be redeemed (Hosea 3:1-5; Amos 9:7-10; Micah 1:1-7). This cleansing will be severe—God will destroy two thirds of the people of Israel because of their unbelief (Zechariah 13:8-9).
 - The believing remnant of Israel will mourn over killing their Messiah and will repent. They will be changed to have hearts of flesh (as opposed to having sinful hearts of stone) and will automatically obey the Law of Moses because it will be written on their hearts (Zechariah 12:10-14; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Jeremiah 31:31-34).
- Satan will respond to Israel’s reestablishment as God’s chosen nation by revealing the beast (the fourth and most powerful king¹⁶) and the false prophet (Daniel 7:7-8, 19-20, 23-24; 9:26-27; Revelation 16:13). The introduction of the beast and false prophet will start the clock for the final seven-year prophetic period before Christ’s return (Daniel 9:24-27).
- The prophesied great tribulation will occur, which will include Satan’s persecution of Israel through his beast and false prophet (Daniel 8:23-26; Revelation 11:1-2; 12:13-17; 13:1-8), and God’s judgments of the earth and its inhabitants (Jeremiah 30:23-24; Revelation 6:12-17; 8:7-12; 9:18). The first three and a half years of the beast’s reign will be *relatively* peaceful—a false appearance of peace—because of his pact with the other nations (Revelation 13:1-6; Matthew 24:6-8).
- The great tribulation will be culminated by Christ’s return and His victory over the nations led by the beast, commonly referred to as the battle of Armageddon (Daniel 7:22, 26; Revelation 16:13-16; Revelation 19:11-16, 19-21; Matthew 24:29-30; Acts 1:9-11).
- The beast and the false prophet will be cast into the lake of fire for eternity (Revelation 19:20), and Satan (*the dragon*) will be bound in the abyss (bottomless pit) for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-3).
- New Jerusalem will descend out of heaven as the bride of Christ onto a reconfigured earth, from where Christ will rule the earth as the King of kings (Revelation 21). This appears to be the beginning of the second phase of fulfillment of the kingdom promises.
- The prophesied first resurrection will occur, when the children of God (kingdom believers) since Adam will enter into Israel’s promised kingdom—new Jerusalem (Revelation 20:4-6; Ezekiel

to John the Baptist instead of the man Elijah. This is similar to the prophecy concerning David sitting on the throne in the kingdom, which was actually referring to Christ and not to the man David—David was a type of Christ (Ezekiel 37:24). Furthermore, there is no mention of Elijah in the book of Revelation.

¹⁶ Three other kings will reign over the Gentile nations after the rapture (Daniel 7:1-27).

37:11-14; John 6:39-44; 11:24). God's people who endure the great tribulation will also enter in (Matthew 10:22-23; 24:13). There will be no sin in New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:27).

- Christ will reign from new Jerusalem for 1,000 years and will be the light of the world (Revelation 20:4-6; 21:22-25). He will be the King of kings and Lord of lords, ruling with a rod of iron over the nations outside of new Jerusalem (the nonbelieving people who survive the great tribulation) because they will still be sinful (Psalm 2:6-9; Isaiah 2:1-4; Revelation 2:25-27; 12:5; 17:14; 19:15-16; 22:14-15). Even though Satan will have no influence over them (he will be in the bottomless pit), the people of the nations will continue to worship their own gods (Micah 4:1-6).
- After 1,000 years of Christ's reign, Satan will be released from the bottomless pit and will gather the nations for one last battle against Christ. Satan's army will be defeated by a fire from heaven and Satan will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:7-10).
- After His enemies are destroyed, Christ will judge the nonbelieving dead of all ages (the second resurrection or resurrection of judgment—John 5:28-29; 12:48; Revelation 20:5) from a great white throne and will cast all of them, referred to as death and Hades, into the lake of fire for eternal judgment (Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 25:41-46).

Therefore, the prophesied last days encompass the period of time beginning with the birth of Christ and ending with the great white throne judgments. If Paul's letters (Romans through Philemon) and his salvation and ministry recorded in the book of Acts were removed from the Bible, then the entire New Testament would consist of the remaining details of the last days and their fulfillment (which would have been fulfilled by now).¹⁷ We should be thankful that God interjected the dispensation of grace according to His eternal plan.

Fulfillment of Prophecy

Contrary to what is commonly believed by Christian denominations and many brethren, *none* of the prophecies regarding Israel has been fulfilled yet. Following the horrible holocaust during World War II, many of the surviving Jews resettled in a portion of the historical promised land, and the political State of Israel was founded through a war of independence in 1948 (instead of being gathered there by God). However, more Jews still live outside the nation than live within it. Israel was also established as a secular nation and continues to be so. Even Orthodox Judaism is a false religion just as it was during the time that Christ was on earth (Matthew 23:1-33). Religious Jews who hold to the Law of Moses continue to be hardened to the truth of God's word and a veil lies over their heart (II Corinthians 3:14-15). Therefore, the Israel of today is simply one of the nations in this dispensation of grace and is no different in God's eyes or in His dealings than any other nation. Efforts by many Christians to support Israel

¹⁷ All the books after Philemon were written to Israel in general, but more specifically to Jewish kingdom brethren. They explain the delay of the fulfillment of their kingdom promises (II Peter 3:3-10), how to live during the time up to and including the great tribulation, and how they will suffer persecution for the sake of Christ. Details of their lives during the first 1,000 years of the kingdom are mostly included in Old Testament prophecies and in the gospel accounts of Matthew through John.

because they consider it to be God's nation and that by doing so are in accordance with prophecy are misguided. Brethren, Israel will not be reestablished as God's nation until sometime after the rapture.¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, false teachers had told the Thessalonian brethren that Christ's return in judgment was at hand (imminent), which would mean that the rapture would have already occurred or, possibly, that there would not even be a rapture as Paul described in his first letter to the Thessalonians. However, Paul very briefly reminded them that Christ's return would be preceded by a falling away (apostasy, or rebellion) followed by (or in conjunction with) the appearance of the lawless one or man of sin (the beast), which would signal the beginning of the tribulation period and would be the person of Satan whom Christ would destroy upon His physical return to earth (II Thessalonians 2:1-12). Paul was reassuring them that these things had not happened and, brethren, they still have not happened. We do not know the full scope of what Paul told the Thessalonian brethren in person about prophetic events following the rapture beyond what he wrote in I Thessalonians 5:1-7 and in II Thessalonians 2:1-12, but he did not go into much detail in his letters to them.

The period of time between the rapture and the great tribulation is unknown, but much has to happen before the beast begins waging war against Israel. Very briefly, the following events are some of which will occur, although not necessarily in this order and some will apparently overlap in time.

- The seven churches described in the first three chapters of Revelation will be established. Church scholars and historians have debated for many years when these churches have happened and which church represents today, or whether they represent actual churches at all. Whether they refer to actual churches in the designated Asian cities or are representative of various spiritual conditions among God's people, the book of Revelation opens by saying that the things John was witnessing about the revelation of Jesus Christ (as revealed to John through the angel of God) had not happened yet (Revelation 1:1-2). Additionally, because of the revelation of the mystery and the interjection of the dispensation of grace, nothing spoken of or prophesied in the book of Revelation has occurred yet. We do not know exactly when these churches will be established, but they are Jewish churches with a kingdom hope (Revelation 1:6; Exodus 19:5-6; I Peter 2:9—Paul never refers to members of the body of Christ as a kingdom of priests). Therefore, they most likely did not coexist with churches of this dispensation of grace in cities outside of Israel where Jews and Gentiles were saved in accordance with the gospel of grace and were equal in the body of Christ. It is more likely that the establishment of these churches and the difficulties they will endure will occur sometime *after* the rapture and apparently will occur over an extended period of time.
- As previously described, Israel will be gathered from the nations into its former promised land. God will reunite Judea and Samaria (referred to as Judah and Israel in the Old Testament), bringing all the tribes together again.

¹⁸ When the church, and the associated influence of the Holy Spirit in the world through us, is taken out of Satan's way at the rapture (II Thessalonians 2:7), the world will be dominated by the Gentiles under the influence of Satan. *Perhaps* this is the time of the fullness of the Gentiles, during which time also Israel's blindness will be lifted and God will open the eyes of its people to the truth of Christ (Romans 11:25-27).

- A *falling away* (as translated in the KJV in II Thessalonians 2:3) will occur at some point. Some brethren believe the Greek word *apostasia*¹⁹ was mistranslated and that it actually refers to the rapture, or catching away of believers. However, II Thessalonians 2:6-7 says that Satan is being restrained now but lawlessness will follow when the Holy Spirit is taken out of his way. As presented in Matthew 24:9-12, it appears that Jesus was referring to this time when He warned His disciples of a time when many false prophets (antichrists) from the people of Israel (see also I John 2:18-19) will rise up and mislead many of the people of Israel, causing them to fall away from the truth. Concurrently, those who believe and stand for the truth of the gospel of the kingdom will suffer great persecution or tribulation. This time of tribulation experienced by God's people does not appear to be the same as the great tribulation that Jesus refers to regarding God's judgments of the nations after the appearance of the beast (Matthew 24:15-22).
- As already noted, God will cleanse His nation Israel through severe judgment. This will be done through God's angels and is not associated with His judgment of the nations during the great tribulation.
- God will raise up 144,000 virgin Jewish men (12,000 each from twelve tribes of Israel), apparently to be the witnesses of Christ to preach the gospel of the kingdom to the nations (Revelation 7:4-8; 14:1-5). Their ministry will fulfill *the great commission* (Matthew 24:14). Because Israel will be cleansed sometime after the rapture (consider that the secular State of Israel today does not have or recognize twelve tribes), it will take at least a generation for these men to be born and raised up in their respective tribes.

Fulfillment of the so-called great commission (it is not referred to as such in Scripture), given by our Lord Jesus Christ to His eleven disciples after He was raised from the dead (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-48; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:6-8), began at Pentecost shortly after Christ's ascension into heaven (Acts 2:1-4). His disciples, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Israel's guilt for crucifying Christ and the need for the people of Israel to repent (Acts 2:14-39). Although thousands believed Peter's message and repented, Jerusalem as a whole, as led by their spiritual leaders, continued to reject this message and persecuted the disciples (Acts 4:1-3; 13:22; 5:17-42; 7:54-60; 8:1-4).

Because the salvation of Jerusalem was to occur first (Luke 24:46-47; Acts 1:7-8), fulfillment of the great commission was interrupted by Israel's disbelief almost as soon as it started. Obedience to the commands included in the great commission will resume sometime after the rapture and it will be fulfilled by the time Christ returns to earth. It is not God's plan or expectation that members of the body of Christ try to fulfill the great commission because we are no longer under the Law but under grace, and the gospel of the kingdom is not God's gospel for this dispensation. An honest evaluation of all the efforts today to fulfill the great commission will demonstrate that no one is actually obeying the

¹⁹ The only other use of this Greek word is in Acts 21:21, where it refers to forsaking or turning away from the Law of Moses.

commands or requirements included in the great commission.²⁰ However, thankfully by His sovereign power and grace, God is using these misguided efforts to save people throughout the world wherever the gospel of salvation is preached.²¹

Brethren, the prophetic events listed above will not start until an unspecified time after the rapture and will take some time to be fulfilled. Remember that Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, or about two generations, before entering into their promised land. It could easily be two or more generations between the rapture and the appearance of the beast, but this is speculation that serves no benefit other than to demonstrate that it will be more than seven years between the rapture and the prophesied second coming of Christ. As this study focuses on the mystery and is not intended to be a study of prophecy, it is left to you to explore post-rapture prophetic events. If you do this from a dispensational perspective and depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 2:6-16; Ephesians 1:15-23), keeping the mystery in mind, you will be far wiser than most Bible scholars and theologians.

The Importance of Understanding the Mystery

The mystery is not something new—Paul taught it nearly 2,000 years ago and it is revealed in every Bible translation that we have. However, the revelation of the mystery is not a part of any denominational doctrine and very few churches teach it. Why is this the case?

During Paul's ministry, which was personally commissioned by the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ, nonbelieving Jews and false brethren followed Paul around to discredit his teaching and successfully convinced some churches that he established to turn away from the truth (Acts 13:49-50; 14:1-7, 19; 15:1-2; 17:10-13; Galatians 1:6-9; 2:4; 3:1-3; II Timothy 4:14-15). Today, the importance of Paul's apostleship and message is generally unknown by most brethren, and is often rejected by brethren who are exposed to it. Many aspects of the mystery and the gospel of grace of God are

²⁰ Christ told His disciples to teach people to observe all that He had commanded His disciples to do (Matthew 28:20; John 14:15). His commandments included: preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 23; 10:7) and repentance and water baptism for the remission of sins (Matthew 4:17; 28:19; Mark 16:16); obeying the Law of Moses (Matthew 23:1-3); selling their possessions (Matthew 19:16-22); not taking any money or extra clothes with them because they would be provided for wherever they went (Matthew 10:9-10); remitting or retaining the sins of those they preached to (John 20:21-23) and judging individuals and cities that reject their message (Matthew 10:11-15); and casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, healing the sick, and raising the dead (Matthew 10:7-8; Mark 16:17-18). Associated promises included receiving what they asked or prayed for (Matthew 7:7-8; 21:21-22; John 14:12-14) and that the Holy Spirit would speak through them when they had to defend the gospel (Matthew 10:16-20). Brethren, none of these things apply to us in this dispensation of grace, and we are disobeying God when we try to do or claim them.

²¹ Few missionaries understand the distinctiveness and scope of the gospel of grace as demonstrated by their desire to preach the gospel of the kingdom as Jesus did and to fulfill the great commission. However, many missionaries do understand the gospel of salvation as presented through Paul (I Corinthians 15:1-4), even if they do not refer to it as such or if they add water baptism or other unnecessary requirements. These missionaries are being used and blessed by God in ways beyond their understanding, and many suffer for the sake of Christ.

contrary to traditional Bible teaching, so people, being easily tied to or swayed by church doctrine or tradition, react negatively to it (Colossians 2:16-19).

Unfortunately, most believers have come to believe that we should be following in the footsteps of Jesus, not realizing that in His human form He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 10:6; 15:24; Acts 5:29-31), and that no one is actually obeying most of His commands (because we are not supposed to and we cannot do so). Perhaps it is easier to relate to an infant or a man; however, we are supposed to know our Savior as the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 5:14-16). Paul's warning to Timothy, although already true in his day, has certainly come to fruition: believers accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires rather than in accordance with the truth (II Timothy 4:3-4).

Why is understanding the mystery, and its differences from prophecy, important? Is this just knowledge for the sake of knowledge? Or, is this something that God truly wants us to know and incorporate into our daily lives? Brethren, the revelation of the mystery through Paul explains the full purpose of the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ as well as God's eternal plan. Furthermore, it explains the many *apparent* contradictions in the Bible, some of which are addressed as follows:

- Did Christ come only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24), or did He come to die for everyone's sin without distinction (Romans 3:21-26; 10:12)?
- Are we to repent and be baptized for the remission of our sins in order to be saved (Mark 1:4; Acts 2:37-38), or are we to simply believe that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 1:13-14)?
- Are we to present the gospel of the kingdom of heaven to the Jews first, beginning with Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and then the rest of the world (Luke 24:45-47; Acts 1:8), or are we to preach the gospel of the grace of God to everyone without distinction (Acts 20:24; Romans 16:25-26)?
- Are we to expect to get what we pray for (Matthew 21:21-22), or are we to expect the peace of God that passes all understanding, realizing that we do not even know how to pray as we should (Philippians 4:6-7; Romans 8:26-28)?
- Are we to obey the Law of Moses (Matthew 23:1-3; Acts 21:20), or are we to realize that the Law was nailed to the cross and that we are not under the Law but under the grace of God (Colossians 2:13-14; Romans 6:14)?
- Are we to sell all our possessions so that all believers have everything in common (Matthew 19:16-22; Acts 2:43-45), or are we to work with our own hands and take care of our own family (I Thessalonians 4:9-12; I Timothy 5:8)?
- Are we to claim and exhibit the power of the Holy Spirit, including speaking in tongues, healing the sick, and raising the dead (Matthew 10:7-8; Mark 16:17-18), or are we to be filled with the Holy Spirit and walk worthy of our salvation, knowing that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit are not available to us in this dispensation of grace (Ephesians 5:15-18; Colossians 1:9-10; I Corinthians 13:8-13)?

- Are we to obey and fulfill the great commission with all its commands (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18), or are we to live for Christ and represent Him as His ambassadors on earth (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:12-17; II Corinthians 5:20-21)?
- Do the people of Israel (Jews) have preeminence in God's plan today (Acts 3:19-26), or is God dealing with everyone on an equal basis—equally sinful and lost (Romans 3:9-12, 21-23)?
- Are we to look forward to being resurrected at the end of the great tribulation to enter Christ's prophesied heavenly kingdom on earth (John 6:39-44; Revelation 20:6), or are we to look forward to being resurrected or caught up to meet our Lord in the air before resumption of the prophesied last days (I Thessalonians 4:13-18)?
- Are we to look forward to having perfect bodies of flesh and blood (Isaiah 65:17-25; Ezekiel 36:25-26), or are we to look forward to having our bodies changed from physical to spiritual bodies to reside with Christ in the heavenly places (I Corinthians 15:50-53)?
- When we die, will our souls go to Paradise (Abraham's bosom) to await resurrection into the kingdom on earth (Luke 16:22-23; 23:39-43), or do we go to heaven where we are already citizens (Philippians 3:20-21; Ephesians 2:4-6)?

Does the list of truths above show contradictions in Scripture? No. Instead, they show the progressive revelation of God's eternal plan for His people. In every point, both statements are Scriptural and true; however, only the second statement applies to us in this dispensation of grace.²² We know that we are not supposed to sacrifice animals to cover or atone for our sins, but that was absolutely required by God in the past. We now know that Christ's sacrificial work at the cross provided God's full righteous requirement for the payment of our sins and that He reconciles us to Himself upon belief in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection for us. However, this truth was not revealed to us until our Lord Jesus Christ revealed the mystery to Paul.

Too often these differences are explained away or simply not addressed in churches today. By doing so, the truth and power of Scripture—the word of God—is watered down and understanding is relegated to opinion. That is why we have so many Christian denominations today. The Bible is the word of God and it provides *everything* we need to know to live as God wants us to live. However, God expects us to rightly divide, or accurately handle, the word of truth to understand which commands and promises apply to whom. We are warned not to mix gospels or disregard or alter the truth revealed to us through Paul (Galatians 1:8; Romans 16:17-18; I Corinthians 3:10-11; II Thessalonians 2:15; 3:14-15; II Timothy 1:13-14; 4:1-4). Understanding the mystery as our Lord revealed it to Apostle Paul truly is the key to understanding Scripture.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling [rightly dividing] the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15)

²² See my studies **Which Gospel?** and **The Two Messages of Our Lord Jesus Christ** for more explanation on the differences between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching [doctrine], for reproof, for correction, for training [instruction] in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate [*complete and proficient*], equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17).

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