

The Mystery of Salvation

By Jeremy Lucas

Several years ago, I had an online discussion with members of another discussion board and the topic was surfaced... "What does it mean to be a Christian?" Of course, this was someone who did not even begin to see the grace message in any way shape or form, but I took it as an opportunity to engage the subject matter in terms of the "mystery."

Basically, the questions were, "What does a Christian need to 'believe' in order to be considered a Christian? What 'belief' is it that saves? Is it simply that Jesus died, was buried, and rose? Is it more? Is it the history of it? What is it?"

Typically, the response is, "You have to believe that Jesus died for your sins and that He rose from the grave." Which is sound and Biblical as a Sunday school response, but it simplifies what I believe to be a much bigger and more grand mystery spelled out in the first part of Ephesians as to what the church, the Body of Christ specifically, should believe as the core of their salvation.

For those of you familiar with "the mystery of Christ" or the "mystery of the gospel," this is not to be confused. Here we are solely referring to and addressing one of the "mysteries" of salvation itself. What saves, as we can all agree, is the body and blood of Christ shed for our sins accompanied by his physical resurrection and ascension to the right hand. The physical aspect is what saves us from our physical condition. But when the question stretches to "What does it MEAN to be a Christian," we must dig a little bit deeper.

"Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him:." Ephesians 1:9-10

The term there is "mystery of His will." And significantly, Paul uses this phrase several other times...

"...How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;" Ephesians 3:3-5

"...And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel, For which I am an ambassador in bonds;" Ephesians 6:19-20a

The term is used over and over and seems quite evidently to be something DIFFERENT from simply saying "the gospel." As in, the "mystery of the gospel" is not the gospel itself, but rather, a "mystery" WITHIN the gospel as it has been known thus far.

So the question is, if Paul has an "insight" into the "mystery of Christ" and his "insight" involves a revelation (something that was not previously known in ages past), then what is it that Paul taught in his letters that NO ONE ELSE taught?

Now before I continue, I'm sure that someone is likely saying to themselves, "Well, Paul taught the same thing as everyone else," but the trouble here is that NO ONE taught the exact same thing as someone else when it came to Scripture. Otherwise, we'd just have one big book rather than 66 different books within a larger whole. Paul DID write and teach something that no one else had been teaching because that was his divine revelation directly from God.

"But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." Galatians 1:11-12

Divine revelation. Something unique and something never before revealed (this is likely to be another set of dialogue, so if it becomes that, I may open up a new thread... which is perfectly okay.).

...Getting back to the original point...

What is it that Paul taught in his writing that NO ONE ELSE taught?

In order to answer this question sufficiently, we have to know what was being taught BEFORE he began teaching and BEFORE he received his revelation and "insight" into the mystery. Let me pose what I believe this answer to be (and we can discuss it from there).

Prior to the revelation given to Paul, the teaching that was being expressed by followers of Christ was two key things.

Jesus IS the Messiah

Jesus died, was buried, and rose again to the right hand of God

Even Paul, right from the shotgun, was focusing on the first part of this teaching when he was first converted.

"But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ." Acts 9:22

He taught what was most basic among others who also taught Jesus Christ. But at this stage in the ministry of Paul, he had not yet begun writing Scripture, nor had any revelation come to him about something "insightful." He simply did as he knew to do and as other disciples were doing. He taught these two things.

Jesus is the Messiah (the Christ)

Jesus died, was buried, and rose again to the right hand of God

Going back to the "mystery" of the gospel, we realize that there was something MUCH more "insightful" and more "mysterious" about the depths of this gospel, but until Paul, no one had the insight of revelation into this matter, so what was it?

Well... nailing down the truth that Jesus is the Christ, this would be a fine line of consistency throughout all teaching, be it Paul, Peter, James, or whomever else. What was DIFFERENT was the teaching and preaching of this "mystery."

In order to have a "mystery," there must first be a surface truth that requires a reader to dig underneath. Like reading any mystery novel, there is a truth of the characters and the plot points, but there are underlying mysteries that the average reader overlooks in a hope that the answers are easy to find or that the solutions to the mystery are found within the surface. This is a naive assumption, but it carries through into a reading of Scripture as well. We assume that the "gospel" is simply the surface, when in fact, there is MUCH more mystery behind the gospel that would help us in our teaching of it to others.

So what is it?

Let's look at the three part surface of the second half.

Jesus died

Jesus was buried

Jesus rose again

This is basic teaching that is affected by the visual documentation of those who saw it with their own eyes. They saw it and wrote it down. Yet OUR salvation now, as Paul says, is not based on sight or on the things seen, but on things unseen. So what is the "unseen" message behind this three part surface teaching?

1) Yes, Jesus died, but we were there. Not in the crowd, but on the cross. We were "crucified with Christ."

"I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." Galatians 2:20

So not only did Christ die (which is a modern day Easter teaching on the surface), but we died with Him. We were there. How is that possible? If you glance through the book of Ephesians (and nearly all of Paul's epistles), you can see that the phrase "in Him" or "in Christ" is used as a constant state of being. Its one of the most pivotal teachings and one of the most mysterious regarding the "insight" of Paul into the gospel. We are "in Him," not outside of Him watching or walking beside. We are IN Christ. Our salvation is IN Him, not somewhere outside His existence. So in that, returning to point #1, we have been "crucified with Christ."

2) Yes, Jesus was buried, but we were there as well. Not outside the tomb, but inside the tomb. We were "buried with Him."

"For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead." Colossians 2:9-12

Not only was Christ buried, but we were buried WITH Him. Why? Because we are IN Him and because He is eternal, where He has always been, we have always been as well. Scripture says that we were "buried with Him in baptism" (a tangent of discussion as well, but consider the preceding verse in which it says 'a circumcision made without hands' implying a context of spiritual things, not physical. We know that there is "one baptism," so here, we see a context that implies this as a spiritual baptism, not a physical one.). So when He was buried, we were IN Him.

3) Yes, Jesus rose from the grave and was seated in heavenly realms, but we were seated in heavenly realms with Him.

"...And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:"
Ephesians 2:6

"...Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead." Colossians 2:12

This is the cap off to the mystery, guys. Not only did Christ die, get buried, and rise from the dead, but so did we. That's the entire reason we're saved. Not because He did it, but because we were IN Him when He did it. Its an amazing mystery that caps our salvation, but here is a passage that sums it up into one simply message...

"It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us: If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself." 2 Timothy 2:11-13

If our entire salvation resides in the fact that we are IN Christ, then it makes the final statement all the more straightforward. If we are faithless (as in, we fail to follow through on our part), then He remains faithful. Why? Because we are IN Him and He cannot deny His own Body.

Like I said, that's an amazing extension of mystery for such a simplified gospel of salvation, but this is what I believe Paul to have been speaking of when he mentioned the "mystery." For the "administration" of this mystery is not simply that Paul taught Gentiles, but that he taught a newly revealed truth that had not previously been taught. And in this mystery, we have our salvation.