
The Book of Ephesians

Chapter 1:8-10

Ministry Reading

Opening Reading -- Ephesians 1:8-14

Ephesians 1:8-14

Wherein He hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence, 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, in whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will, that we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ, in whom ye also trusted after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom also, after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise which is the earnest of our inheritance, until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory.

Grace and Glory: Two Great Characteristics of God

From verse 6 God is glorified in grace, to the praise of the glory of His grace. And then at the end of verse 7 we have the riches of His grace. Grace and glory are prominent throughout this chapter -- two great characteristics of God. In grace there is the unfolding of operations that flow from God Himself and from

what He is toward poor man who has no claim whatsoever. And it is not some meager dispensement: it is according to the riches of His grace. Grace is God for us, and all that He is, in spite of all that we are. The whole chapter is filled with expressions that cannot be measured. They are unfathomable.

The doctrine of man's free will stands in direct opposition to this. Free will insists that man himself is capable of starting the process, of making a choice that has an influence on how things turn out. But these verses describe God abounding toward us -- not man abounding toward God. To reverse that direction would be to turn the passage entirely upside down.

Wisdom and Prudence: God's Mind in Action

In verse 8 the wisdom and prudence are God's, not ours. Having abounded toward us in the riches of His grace, there is no point at which God must then fall back on man's wisdom or man's intelligence to carry things forward. A helpful distinction between the two words has been drawn from the Greek: wisdom is the mind conceiving all things rightly -- which is what one would naturally expect of God -- while prudence, or intelligence, is the activity of the mind seizing the objects presented to it. Both are entirely His. In all wisdom and in all prudence He has abounded toward us.

The Mystery of His Will

Verse 9 tells us that God has made known to us the mystery of His will. A mystery, in the New Testament sense, is not something vague or obscure -- it is something that was hidden and has now been revealed. This is one of the mysteries that was hidden in the Old Testament and is now disclosed. Verse 10 makes plain what the mystery is: that in the administration of the fullness of times, God might head up all things in Christ -- things in heaven and things on earth.

It is according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself. He did not consult with anyone. This was, as we learn in chapter 3, an eternal purpose. The good pleasure of verse 9 is the good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, and there is an active energy in that word 'purposed' -- more than merely having a will about something. One may have a will about something and let it be known without actively taking the matter in hand. But when one purposes something, there is an engagement with it, a taking it up. God has purposed this in Himself.

Refuting the Saying: The New Is in the Old, Concealed

A well-known saying about the two Testaments runs: the New is in the Old, concealed; the Old is in the New, revealed. It sounds crisp and memorable. It is also wrong. It originated with Augustine, the father of Amillennialism, who introduced the idea that the church is now the kingdom of Christ. Whatever its appeal as a catchphrase, it does not accurately represent Scripture.

The key to the error lies in making everything in Scripture a question of salvation. One can certainly find predictions of Gentile salvation in the Old Testament, but that is not the mystery of Ephesians 1 and 3. That Gentiles would someday be blessed was prophesied -- it is not the mystery. The mystery is that Gentiles should be one body in Christ with Jews: the heavenly and the earthly united under one headship. That the headship of Christ should encompass both the heavenly and earthly spheres together -- that is nowhere revealed in the Old Testament in prose, in explicit statement. It is therefore properly a mystery. Covenant theology, by merging the earthly and heavenly together, washes out this distinction, and with it a very great deal of the beauty of Scripture.

No Type of the Body in the Old Testament

It is worth noting carefully that in the Old Testament there is no type of the body of Christ. There are types of the bride. There are types of the house, and even the

tabernacle as a type of the heavenly sanctuary (as Hebrews interprets it). But no type of the body. How could there be? The body of Christ, formed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, uniting believers to the risen head in heaven, is something unique to this present dispensation and has no counterpart in the Old Testament economy. The absence of a type is itself an indication that this was not revealed there.

The Dispensation of the Fullness of Times

Darby translates the word rendered 'dispensation' in the King James as 'administration.' The distinction is significant. The word 'dispensation' tends to suggest merely a period of time -- God pushes the start button, time ticks by, God pushes the stop button. But an administration is more than a time-bound period. It implies an administrator: someone who actively takes matters in hand for their accomplishment. The character of this particular administration is the heading up of all things in heaven and on earth in the hands of Christ.

Moses was not present to administer the Mosaic economy throughout its course. But this administration has a very unique character: the administrator, the Lord Jesus Christ, is there for the entire duration. He has the whole of it in His hands. All the times receive their fullness, and everything comes under His headship universally. That is God's good pleasure.

Three Administrations, Not Seven

Dispensationalism, as popularly presented, speaks of seven dispensations, making such periods as 'innocence' a dispensation in its own right. But the pre-fall state of man in Eden stands in a category of its own -- it is not properly the trial of the first man as fallen. The trial of man as fallen, meant to demonstrate that he is not recoverable, begins after the fall and continues until the cross.

More carefully considered, there are three administrations in Scripture. The first is government, committed to man after the flood -- the first true administration, in which man has a defined responsibility before God. Man failed in it. The second is the Mosaic economy -- the administration of the law, with Israel as God's called people bearing the testimony. Man failed in that also. The third and final is this one: the administration of the fullness of times, in the hands of Christ. Meanwhile God called out Abraham and through him established the principles of election, purpose, and calling in the earth -- but that was not a new administration; it operated side by side with government. And while Paul was given 'a dispensation of the grace of God' (Ephesians 3:2), that was his own unique commission, not a distinct time period. There are three administrations, not seven.

Times Plural: Distinguishable Epochs

The word to emphasize in verse 10 is not 'dispensation' but 'times' -- specifically the plural: times. There is something to the dispensational reading of history that is sound, and it is right there in the text: times, not time. This is not the Newtonian concept of uniform time ticking inexorably from eternity past to eternity future. There are distinguishable epochs, each with its own character -- periods in which God has acted in history in ways that mark them off from one another. There are more such times than there are administrations. Scripture speaks of ages, and there are more distinguishable time periods than there are the three administrations we have identified.

The scoffers of 2 Peter 3 say that all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation. That is the exact opposite of times with an S. The scoffers insist on an uninterrupted, undifferentiated flow -- and notably they deny the flood, which was one of the great interruptions in man's history. The scoffers leave God out; the fullness of times brings God in.

God Changes the Times: Daniel 2:20-21

Daniel expressed it well when he blessed the name of God at the revelation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream:

Daniel 2:20-21

Blessed be the name of God forever and ever, for wisdom and might are His. And He changeth the times and the seasons; He removeth kings and setteth up kings; He giveth wisdom unto the wise and knowledge to them that know understanding.

The prophet Daniel was keenly aware of times and of God's changing them. His entire book turns on that question. And in Ephesians 1:10 we are given the great goal toward which all the times have been moving: their fullness, their completion in the administration of Christ's universal headship.

What the Old Testament Saints Knew and Did Not Know

It is not easy to know precisely what the godly in Israel understood of the outcome of the testing of man. What is clear is that the faithful among them rose above the effort to keep the law, entering personally into communion with God and conscious of their own failure. They were qualitatively different persons from those who merely professed Israel's national standing. As to the new birth, that was implicit before it was explicit. The Lord's challenge to Nicodemus showed that Ezekiel's language about a new heart should have led him to understand that man needs a fundamental change. Life and incorruptibility were there -- but they were brought fully to light in the gospel.

Resurrection is another case in point. It was not a revealed doctrine in the Old Testament, yet the faith of the godly apprehended it. Job had the faith of resurrection far back in the patriarchal period. Martha confessed a future resurrection. Three prophetic passages use resurrection figuratively, and one does

not use a thing figuratively without some understanding of its literal meaning. It was there, but it was not set out in the ordered clarity we have from 1 Corinthians 15: Christ the firstfruits, afterward they that are Christ's. The explicit statement awaited the New Testament. The principle in 1 Corinthians 15 holds good: first that which is natural, afterwards that which is spiritual.

The Universal Headship in Christ: The Simplicity of Verse 10

There is something beautiful about the simplicity of verse 10. God's purpose for heaven and for earth is stated in one broad stroke: all things gathered together in one in Christ. No bureaucracy, no complex layered hierarchy -- just Christ as the head and focal point of everything. Things in heaven: gathered together in one in Christ. Things on earth: gathered together in one in Christ. That is the administration of the fullness of times.

The cross is the basis for all of this. He that humbles himself shall be exalted in due time. As Christ went down to the very depths, so He is raised to the highest position. In the heavenly sphere will be glorified Old Testament saints, martyrs of the tribulation, and the saints of the church -- one body, all under Him. On the earth, the various families and nations of men, all under His sway. And in the Beloved -- for we get 'in whom' again in verse 11 -- it is God's good pleasure to place universal dominion into the hands of such a one as He is.

A Type in 1 Samuel 30: David Recovering All

A striking type may be found in 1 Samuel 30:18, in connection with the burning of Ziklag:

1 Samuel 30:18

And David recovered all that the Amalekites had carried away, and David rescued his two wives.

If one knows what the Lord Jesus is going to accomplish in the administration of the fullness of times, the parallel is striking. He will recover all that the devil and man have carried away out of the influence of God's Holy Spirit. And in David's recovering all, he rescues his two wives -- a heavenly bride and an earthly bride. Two spheres. It does not prove the doctrine, but as a type it is full of beauty.

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Lord willing.