

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

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Measuring The Immeasurable

“For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

“Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

“That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man;

“That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,

“May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth and height;

“And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.”

—Eph. 3:14-19

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SUBJECT

One cannot read these words from the pen of Paul without feeling that the truth which he so earnestly prays the saints might understand must be one of profound significance and vital importance.

It is a sad fact, however, that these very truths—the most important of all—are those of which believers are most apt to be ignorant. The passage before us is a case in hand.

There has been much discussion as to *just what* it is that the apostle would have the saints know the breadth and length and depth and height of, for he does not say.

Some have concluded from the immediate context that he refers to the love of Christ, but this does injustice to the plain wording of the passage. The apostle makes it very clear that the saints must be “rooted and grounded in love” *to be able to comprehend* this great truth, and that *only as they comprehend it* will they come to “know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.”

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

In other words, an understanding of this precious truth has its root in love and bears the fruit of love. But what is *the truth itself* to which Paul refers, and why does he not name it?

The answer should not be difficult to those who have come to rejoice in God's secret purpose and grace, for it was the revelation of "the mystery" which had so taken hold of the apostle that his very "neglect" to mention the word itself simply indicates how large a place it held in his message and ministry, for in this passage he apparently assumes that the saints will know what he is referring to.

It is as if a businessman wished to have a building erected and had been engaged for some hours in discussing it with his architect. After fully going over his plans, let us say, the businessman says to the architect, "I trust we are settled now as to the breadth and length and depth and height"; to which the architect replies with a puzzled expression, "Of what?" The businessman may well exclaim, "Don't you even know what we have been talking about? Have I tried so hard to make you understand and all in vain?"

We feel that those who wonder what it is the apostle can be referring to here are perhaps in line for a similar reprimand.

What was *the very theme of the apostle's message*? What did he strive day after day to make all men see? *The mystery!* (Eph. 3:8). Was it not the mystery and its associated mysteries which he had long dedicated his life to proclaim and as the herald of which he wished to be known?

I Cor. 4:1, "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God."

What is *the main subject of this particular epistle*? *The mystery*, the glorious truth which characterizes this age, that rather than blessing the nations through Israel with Christ as King, God has "*broken down the middle wall of partition between us (Jews and Gentiles)... THAT HE MIGHT RECONCILE BOTH UNTO GOD IN ONE BODY BY THE CROSS.*" (Eph. 2:14-16).

What is *the great topic of this very chapter*? There is but one answer: *The mystery*, that glorious revelation of grace specially committed to him (Vers. 2-4); that blessed truth, "*in other ages not made known...the unsearchable riches of Christ...which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God.*" (Vers. 5, 8, 9).

You ask what it is the apostle prays so fervently that we might be enabled to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of? What is he *always* praying that we might understand? *The mystery!*

In the first chapter of this same epistle he speaks of God "*having made known unto us the mystery of His will*" (Eph. 1:9), and prays earnestly that the saints might be given "*the spirit of wisdom and revelation*" to understand it.

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

To the Colossians he writes that since the day he heard of their salvation he has not ceased to pray that they might be *“filled with all wisdom and spiritual understanding”* (1:9) to comprehend this blessed truth.

“Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints:

“To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:26, 27).

It is significant, then, that the apostle does not even state what it is he wishes them to know the breadth and length and depth and height of. He *assumes they will know* since it has consistently been the subject of his message. The fact that so many sincere believers today do *not* know is evidence of the sad spiritual state of the Church and of the extent of her departure from Pauline message of grace.

MEASURING THE IMMEASURABLE

The use of such words as breadth and length in this passage does not of course imply that it is possible for us with our limitations to fully measure the magnitude of God’s eternal purpose. Indeed, when we consider the subject we soon find that we have launched out to an ocean fullness, but in the measure that we *begin* to appreciate its infinite dimensions, in that measure we come to *“know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.”*

But what, some reader may ask, does the mystery have to do with breadth and length and depth and height? Let us see, and prove for ourselves that there is no message to which these dimensions may be so appropriately applied.

THE BREADTH OF IT

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

“If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

“How that by revelations 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).”
(Eph. 3:1-4).

“The prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles!”

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

Let us remember here that all through Old Testament times Israel alone was God's chosen people. To her was committed the Word and the worship of God and those who wished to approach God had to do so through the favored nation. When our Lord was on earth He said, "*salvation is of the Jews*" (John 4:22) and both He and His apostles confined their ministry to "*the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Matt. 10:5, 6; 15:24). Even at Pentecost and shortly thereafter the disciples of Messiah preached the Word "*to none but unto the Jews only.*" (Acts 11:19). It is not until after the conversion of Saul that we find uncircumcised Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit and it is Paul who later becomes the great apostle of the Gentiles. (Rom. 11:13). It is here that the truth of the mystery comes in.

It was no secret, even according to Old Testament prophecy, that God would send salvation to the Gentiles. This is recognized even under the so-called "Great Commission." But according to God's *prophesied* program it was (and still is) His purpose to bless the Gentiles *through Israel*. This is why the eleven (later twelve) were instructed to begin their worldwide ministry at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). It requires but a superficial reading of the Old Testament prophets to see that before millennial blessing can be ushered in Israel must be brought to Messiah's feet. This is why the twelve apostles remained faithfully at Jerusalem even when the multitude of the disciples were scattered by persecution. (See Acts 8:1). Israel had refused to accept their message and *they could not be true to the Scriptures and to their commission by leaving Israel now to go to the Gentiles.*

It was at this time—when the prophecy seemed to have failed—that God began to unfold the mystery of His eternal purpose and grace. It was at this time that He began to reveal what the cross had accomplished and to show that through Christ's merits He could justly pour out the riches of His grace upon all who would accept it. Setting aside the favored nation temporarily He brought salvation to the Gentiles in spite of her rebellion; through her fall instead of her rise. (Cf. Isa. 60:1-3; Rom. 11:11, 12).

Israel will indeed some day become the channel of blessing to the world, but it was necessary that the mystery of the gospel should first be revealed and that she too should learn experimentally that it is not her goodness but God's grace, not her righteousness but the merits of Christ, that will finally save her, and the nations through her instrumentality.

Had God not directly intervened, salvation never would have gotten to the Gentiles for Israel did everything in her power to keep it from them.

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

O the breadth of God's eternal purpose and His grace! It does not confine itself to the blessing of one nation or even of all nations through one nation. It is pure, free, abounding grace to all the world direct from God Himself.

“Who will have ALL MEN to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

“For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus;

“Who gave himself A RANSOM FOR ALL, to be testified in due time.

“Whereunto I [Paul] am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity.” (I Tim. 2:4-7).

“FOR THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE JEW AND THE GREEK: FOR THE SAME LORD OVER ALL IS RICH UNTO ALL THAT CALL UPON HIM.

“FOR WHOSOEVER SHALL CALL UPON THE NAME OF THE LORD SHALL BE SAVED.” (Rom.10:12, 13).

“But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

“FOR HE IS OUR PEACE, WHO HATH MADE BOTH ONE, AND HATH BROKEN DOWN THE MIDDLE WALL OF PARTITION BETWEEN US.” (Eph. 2:13, 14).

“FOR GOD HATH CONCLUDED THEM ALL IN UNBELIEF THAT HE MIGHT HAVE MERCY UPON ALL.” (Rom. 11:32).

“AND THAT HE MIGHT RECONCILE BOTH UNTO GOD IN ONE BODY BY THE CROSS, HAVING SLAIN THE ENMITY THEREBY:

“AND CAME AND PREACHED PEACE TO YOU WHICH WERE AFAR OFF, AND TO THEM THAT WERE NIGH.” (Eph. 2:16, 17).

“For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if ONE DIED FOR ALL, then were all dead:

“And that HE DIED FOR ALL, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them and rose again.

“Wherefore HENCEFORTH KNOW WE NO MAN AFTER THE FLESH....” (II Cor. 5:14-16).

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

And this infinite breadth does not enter into the matter of salvation alone. It has a relation to believers as well. In the program of God for this age there are not hundreds of denominations, having the right to admit men into their communions by requiring them to submit to various and conflicting religious rites. No, just as there is now but ONE WORLD in the sight of God, so there is also but ONE CHURCH.

“There is ONE BODY, and ONE SPIRIT, even as ye are called in ONE HOPE of your calling;

“ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM,

**“ONE GOD and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”
(Eph. 4:4-6).**

Alas that the professing church has departed so far from the truth that it is divided into hundreds of “bodies,” practicing scores of “baptisms” and boasting when it becomes possible for those of “the various faiths” to meet together in union services!

THE LENGTH OF IT

“Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.” (I Tim. 1:16).

Even as the mystery of God’s eternal purpose began to dawn, God was still showing His longsuffering to apostate Israel. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, the apostle Paul says,

“But to Israel He saith, ALL DAY LONG HAVE I STRETCHED FORTH MY HANDS UNTO A DISOBEDIENT AND GAINSAYING PEOPLE.” (Rom. 10:21).

Nor did even the setting aside of Israel as a nation imply that God’s patience had now been exhausted, for we have already seen that God concluded them all in unbelief *that He might have mercy upon all* and Paul himself is the outstanding example of His grace and longsuffering, for God’s answer to Israel’s rebellion was—amazing fact!—the conversion of Saul, the rebel leader, and his commission to go and preach the gospel of the grace of God.

That God’s longsuffering is a particular characteristic of “this present evil age” is clearly set forth in Peter’s last recorded words, where he tells us what he has learned from Paul as to the delay in Christ’s return to judge and reign:

“THE LORD IS NOT SLACK concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; BUT IS LONGSUFFERING to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

“AND ACCOUNT THAT THE LONGSUFFERING OF OUR LORD IS SALVATION; EVEN AS OUR BELOVED BROTHER PAUL ALSO ACCORDING TO THE WISDOM GIVEN UNTO HIM HATH WRITTEN UNTO YOU.” (II Pet. 3:9, 15).

But thus far we have dealt only with the length of *God's patience in this present evil age*. Let our minds now go back before the world began and ahead to the ages to come if we would begin to “comprehend” the wonder of His eternal purpose.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ:

“According as HE HATH CHOSEN US IN HIM BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD....” (Eph. 1:3, 4).

“THAT IN THE AGES TO COME HE MIGHT SHOW THE EXCEEDING RICHES OF HIS GRACE IN HIS KINDNESS TOWARD US THROUGH CHRIST JESUS.” (Eph. 2:7).

Think of it! Long before the world began we were on His heart and in His purposes, and in the ages to come He will use us to show to the universe what He can and will do for poor sinners who trust in Christ!

THE DEPTH OF IT

This dimension too is appropriately associated with the mystery, for not until the unfolding of the mystery do we come to what is called “the preaching of the cross.” True, the *fact* of the cross had been prophesied, but not all that the cross was to accomplish. Contrast even Peter's accusations concerning the cross in his Pentecostal address with Paul's boasting in it some years later.

Think, then, of the depth of sin and the depth to which our blessed Lord had to stoop to save us from it. Read in Paul's letter to the Philippians the record of Christ's self-humbling:

“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery [a thing to be grasped after] to be equal with God:

“But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

“And being found in the fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Phil. 2:6-8).

Meditate upon this passage and see how each phrase takes the Son of God another step downward, not into sin but into the sinner's place of humiliation and shame and suffering until finally he has paid the uttermost farthing for sin.

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

Yes, we often read it hurriedly or quote it as a matter of fact, but it is an amazing and wonderful truth that

“WE HAVE REDEMPTION THROUGH HIS BLOOD, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS ACCORDING TO THE RICHES OF HIS GRACE.” (Eph. 1:7).

All this is bound up with the mystery by the simple fact that God had not been handicapped by human failure, for He had the cross in view as the great answer to man’s rebellion.

If Israel refuses to be the channel of blessing to the Gentiles, He shows them that He did not choose them because He *needed* them, for, setting them aside *He offers salvation full and free to all by grace through faith alone.* And why can He not justly do so when Christ has died to pay for sin? When this has been learned by the children of Israel they will be saved and will become the instruments in God’s hand to bring blessing and salvation to the nations.

And so God showed that He had not been taken by surprise when Israel refused the risen Christ. He had known exactly what they would do and had allowed these things to come to pass in order that His secret eternal purpose might be unfolded.

It is in regard to this very truth that the apostle cries:

“O THE DEPTH OF THE RICHES BOTH OF THE WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. HOW UNSEARCHABLE ARE HIS JUDGMENTS, AND HIS WAYS PAST FINDING OUT!” (Rom. 11:33).

THE HEIGHT OF IT

And need we point out to our readers how the idea of height is associated with the mystery?

After stating that we were all *“the children of disobedience”* and therefore *“by nature the children of wrath, even as others,”* our apostle goes on to say in his Ephesian letter:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us,

“Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved);

“AND HATH RAISED US UP TOGETHER AND MADE US TO SIT TOGETHER IN HEAVENLY PLACES IN CHRIST JESUS.” (Eph. 2:4-6).

This is the high and exalted position of the simplest believer in Christ. *“Accepted in the Beloved One,”* (Eph. 1:6), God looks upon him as already seated at His own right hand and *“BLESSED WITH ALL SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS IN THE HEAVENLIES IN CHRIST.”* (Eph. 1:3).

The Dimensions Of The Mystery

By Cornelius R. Stam

O that we might comprehend this more fully! That we might walk by faith above the sorrows and sins of this world! That we might *occupy* our rightful position in Christ!

Paul himself doubtless comprehended this more fully than any of us. How else could he have written about sitting in heavenly places while confined in a Roman dungeon? How else could he have exclaimed from that same dark prison, "*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice?*" How else could so much joy and peace and glory have shined from that prison cell?

Yes, and even while in that prison, he prayed constantly for other saints as the Holy Spirit still intercedes for us all, that we might know

“WHAT IS THE EXCEEDING GREATNESS OF HIS POWER TO US-WARD WHO BELIEVE, ACCORDING TO THE WORKING OF HIS MIGHTY POWER.

“WHICH HE WROUGHT IN CHRIST, WHEN HE RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, AND SET HIM AT HIS OWN RIGHT HAND IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES.

“FAR ABOVE ALL PRINCIPALITY, AND POWER, AND MIGHT, AND DOMINION, AND EVERY NAME THAT IS NAMED, NOT ONLY IN THIS WORLD, BUT ALSO IN THAT WHICH IS TO COME.” (Eph. 1:19-21).

THE LOVE OF CHRIST WHICH PASSETH KNOWLEDGE

Surely we shall never fully know the infinite love of Christ; the love that brought Him down from the glory of heaven to suffer agony and shame in our stead that He might have us for Himself and that some day He might present us to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. But we can *begin* to know and enjoy that love here and now. And how better can we begin to know it than by measuring the breadth and length and the depth and the height of His great purpose for us?

We have only begun to do this in this brief Bible study. Let us not stop here. Let us carry our rule with us constantly and measure carefully again and again those things which the heart of the Infinite has planned and prepared for us. Thus and thus alone shall we begin to know the love of Christ—*the love that passeth knowledge*.