






The Mysteries of the Church

 Various
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Last time we showed that when Jesus came the prophetic calendar was ripe for the coming of the kingdom of God; the Jewish people were living in the fourth kingdom prophesied by Daniel, they were living near the end of the 490 years prophesied by Daniel and there was a prophet on the scene who was very much like Elijah. The one like Elijah was John the Baptizer and he was proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. When Jesus arrived it was revealed to John that Jesus was the Messiah and he pointed to Him as the One the nation needed to believe in. Jesus also proclaimed that the kingdom of God was at hand. It was evident that the nation needed to repent in order for the kingdom to come. He selected twelve of His disciples to go throughout Israel proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. But the leadership of the nation Israel led the people in rejecting Jesus as King and His offer of the kingdom. Therefore, He pronounced judgment on that generation. The judgment came in AD70 when the Romans surrounded Jerusalem and destroyed the city, the Temple and over 1 million Jews. Jesus also proclaimed that the kingdom was being postponed as to its entrance into history until a generation of Israel repents and receives the King. This postponement is spelled out in Matthew 13 by way of parables. The teaching in parables was a new teaching methodology. The disciples did not understand why He was speaking in parables. Jesus explained that the parables expressed the mysteries of the kingdom and that only those who received Him and His prior teaching would understand these mystery truths. Those who rejected Him would not get further understanding. The primary mystery of the kingdom is that it was being postponed. Characteristics of the period of postponement are revealed; there would be a growth of sons of the kingdom alongside sons of the evil one. The sons of the kingdom are heirs of the kingdom and have citizenship in the kingdom, but they are not in the kingdom yet. It's simply saying they have a place in the kingdom when it comes. The beginning of the sons of the kingdom would be small but would grow quite large. At the same time the sons of the evil one would come to dominate the world. At the end of the postponement Christ would return with angels to judge the world by separating out the sons of the kingdom from the sons of the evil one. Then the kingdom would come. So, the postponement is the period from the rejection of the kingdom by the nation Israel to the acceptance of the kingdom by the nation Israel.

After the rejection, Jesus began to prepare His followers for ministry during the postponement. They did not understand but the ministry He was preparing them for would be the Church. He revealed the Church for the first time in Matt 16:18 when He said, "I will build My Church." It's apparent that this was a future building project. He uses the future tense. This building project was not a continuation of the nation Israel. It was something entirely distinct that would be built on Messiah Himself. He would be the foundation stone and Peter and other believers would be stones laid upon the foundation. In 1 Cor 12:13 Paul revealed that entrance into the body is by Spirit baptism, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, entrance is by Spirit baptism. In Eph 1:20-23 Paul revealed that this body is the Church. Therefore, if entrance into the body is by Spirit baptism and the body is the Church, then entrance into the Church is by Spirit baptism. The Spirit baptism was yet future in Acts 1:4-5 and something past in Acts 11:15-17 so that Peter made clear that it began in Acts 2 when the Spirit fell upon the Jews at the beginning. This means Acts 2 is the beginning of the Church. The Church began with all Jews. Then in Acts 8 Samaritans were added. In Acts 10 Gentiles were added alongside of them. All of them entered the same universal Church, the Messiah's body, and that entrance was brought about by Spirit baptism. Therefore, in the Book of Acts we are getting a picture of what marks one out as a Church age believer and distinguishes him from the nation Israel. The major mark is not faith, Gentiles had faith during the OT. Salvation has always been by faith. But the major mark of the Church age believer is that He is Spirit baptized and thereby identified with Messiah's body. This was never true of any OT believer.

Now then, since the Church began in Acts 2 then it began within the postponement. It was the postponement that was the major revelation of the mysteries of the kingdom. And since the Church begins within the mystery of the kingdom, and is something entirely new, then the Church must be a mystery itself. And so it behooves us to understand clearly what a mystery is. This is a much overlooked or ignored word, but it has tremendous importance.

We said last time that the Greek word for mystery is *musthion*. So it's obvious that we got our English word from this word. In English, a mystery is something that is difficult to penetrate, but in the Greek it has a different meaning, it means something impossible to penetrate because it is hidden in God. We said the first usage is in Matt 13:11, where Jesus said, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted." And I pointed to Matt 13:35 as an essential definition of mystery as something hidden in God from the foundation of the world, that is now being revealed. Put simply, a mystery is something that was concealed, but is now revealed. It could not be known, but now it can be known fully. We want to show that the Church was a mystery in the OT; something concealed in the plan of God, but now revealed in the pages of the NT.

That the Church was a mystery is an unavoidable conclusion that scholars have detected. But how one defines a mystery, and therefore, in what sense the Church was a mystery, has become a real bone of contention. Scholars of the different theological schools define it differently in order to support their theological system. I noticed 20

years ago that people like to hit grease on this word so they can support their theology and that these theological systems stand or fall on how you define this one word. Because of that I published an article in a theological journal about the word "mystery," its biblical definition, and how progressive dispensationalists and covenant theologians must re-define it. The progressives defined a mystery as something not historically realized in the OT. In other words, what they are trying to do is tone down the distinction of Israel and the Church that was made by classic dispensationalists; they wanted to make the Church a progressive development of Israel, and therefore a continuation of the one people of God, a spiritual Israel if you will, without jettisoning a future kingdom. So they re-defined the Church as a mystery in the sense that it was not yet realized in history during the OT. The covenant theologians went further by defining a mystery as something unrecognized in the OT. In other words, it is there, it was just not seen or recognized. What they are trying to do is totally erase any distinction between Israel and the Church so that Israel is the Church in the OT and the Church is Israel in the NT, and therefore there is only one people of God, the elect, and they do get rid of a future kingdom of God on earth. So both groups re-defined the Church as a mystery and they did so in order to support the idea that there is only one people of God; either by progression, in the sense that the Church was added to Israel, or by way of replacement, in the sense that the Church replaced Israel.

I hope you can see from this that it is very important to understand the Biblical definition of mystery. The word is used 28 times in the NT. Three are in the gospels (Matt 13:11; Mk 4:11 and Lk 8:10); 21 usages are by Paul in the epistles (Rom 11:25; 16:25-27; 1 Cor 2:1?, 7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Eph 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Col 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thess 2:7; 1 Tim 3:9, 16) and four usages are by John in the Revelation (Rev 1:20; 10:7; 17:5, 7). Paul uses it most often. We might ask, "Where did Paul get his concept of the "mystery?" There is an argument that he got it from the pagan mystery religions that littered the Roman Empire. But Paul grew up in Tarsus as a Pharisee. He would not have borrowed his definitions of mystery from pagans. Instead he would have gotten it from the OT. In the Greek version of the OT the only place we find this word is in Daniel. In Daniel 2 it is used eight times and in Daniel 4 it is used one time. In Daniel 2, all eight uses are related to the visions and dreams which were hidden in King Nebuchadnezzar's head which he wanted his wise men, conjurers and magicians to reveal to him. Remember the story? He had this repetitive dream. The dream bothered him. He wanted to understand the meaning of the dream. But he questioned the interpretations the wise men gave to dreams. Therefore, he reasoned that if they really had contact with the gods, and could give the meaning of the dreams, then they could access the dreams themselves, in his head. So, he kept the dream hidden from them and challenged them to reveal to him the dream. Of course, they couldn't do it. Not because the dream was unrealized in history, as the progressives might assert, or because it was unrecognized, as the covenant theologians might claim, but simply because it was unrevealed and inaccessible, hidden away, and no amount of investigation or thought could conjure up what was hidden in Nebuchadnezzar's mind. The only way they could know it was if Nebuchadnezzar revealed it himself, or someone who had access to Nebuchadnezzar's thoughts revealed it. Since Nebuchadnezzar would not, then only the one true God could reveal it, which He did to Daniel. So this

passage seems to be the Scriptural basis of Paul's usage of the word "mystery" in the NT as something hidden and inaccessible, but now revealed in a way that can be known and understood. Renald Showers said, "Paul used the term "mystery" to refer to a body of divine knowledge that was kept completely hidden from mankind in ages past...which mankind could never have discovered through the use of their senses or reason...and which God has now revealed to them..."¹ Arnold Fruchtenbaum was equally clear when he said, "In New Testament Greek, the meaning is both technical and simple; It refers to something that was totally unrevealed in the Old Testament, and only revealed in the New Testament. For something to qualify as a New Testament mystery, it must be something totally unrevealed anywhere in the Old Testament. If it is knowable from the Old Testament, it is not a mystery. A mystery, then, is something only knowable from the New Testament." This means that the Church cannot have even been prophesied in the OT.

When we come to the NT there are 28 usages of this word but they boil down to ten mysteries; eight of these are divine and two are satanic. We are interested in five of these mysteries because they relate to the Church. And when we look at all five we see that the Church itself was a mystery until Christ first revealed it in Matt 16:18. So five passages or mysteries.

The first mystery of the Church is that Jew and Gentile are united in one new man, one body. Ephesian 2-3 declare this mystery. Turn to Eph 3. In Eph 3:1 we read, "For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—²if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; ³that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief." Here we are told that Paul was given a stewardship. His responsibility was to dispense the mystery. This mystery was made known to him by revelation, which is the definition of a mystery. And he says at the end of verse 3 that he wrote about it before in brief. Where he wrote about it before in brief is Eph 2:11-22. So let's look at what he said about the mystery here. In 2:11, "Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," *which is* performed in the flesh by human hands—¹²*remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." That's a description of the Gentile position during the OT. He could be saved but he was largely excluded from many of Israel's privileges. But verse 13, "But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near [near to privileges] by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, ¹⁵by 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, ¹⁶and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity." The phrase in verse 15 that "He might make the two into one new man" is to say that after the cross, He took believing Jews and believing Gentiles and made them into one new man, not one new Israel, not a spiritual Israel, a new man, that is, a new and unique entity. And he also says that they are "one body," which is the body of Messiah. In verse 17 he goes on to say, "And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who

were near; ¹⁸for through Him we both have our access by one Spirit to the Father.” We get that access to the Father by Spirit baptism, whether Jew or Gentile. So, what we have now is equal privileges. The mystery is not that Gentiles could be saved in the OT, that was already true in the OT, salvation is always by grace through faith. But the mystery is that Jews and Gentiles have equal privileges, they are one new man and the body of Messiah and this was not true in the OT. Verse 19, “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, ²⁰having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*, ²¹in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, ²²in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.” Here we see something more, something else that makes the Church different from Israel. The Church is a temple whereas Israel was not a temple, they had a physical temple where they had to walk to worship God, but the Church is a temple itself that is growing, it is a living temple. That is what Paul had revealed in brief about the mystery so far up to 3:3. So we continue in 3:4, “By referring to this [the mystery], when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit;” See, it was something hidden in previous generations, but now revealed. That’s the definition of a mystery. Verse 6 is the content of the mystery. “*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 gospel,” Gentiles are equal participants and members in the body through the gospel. This mystery cannot be that Gentiles can be saved. Gentiles were saved throughout the OT. Arnold Fruchtenbaum said, “The content of the mystery specifically (v. 6) is that Jewish and Gentile believers are united in one body, and this one body is distinct from both Israel and the Gentiles.” It is, as Paul said before, one new man. Verse 7, “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. ⁸To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly *places*.” Verse 9 says this mystery was hidden in God but verse 10 says so that now it may be made known, that again is the definition of a mystery. Therefore, the first mystery related to the Church is that Jews and Gentiles are united in one body, they are one new man that is distinct from both Israel and the Gentiles.

The second mystery related to the Church is the mystery of Christ’s indwelling. Turn to Col 1:24. Paul, rejoicing in his sufferings, says, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church,” the definition of the Church is that it is Messiah’s body. Paul played a role in the body “in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions.” Verse 25, “Of *this church* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit,” Paul was given a stewardship to dispense, “so that I might fully carry out the *preaching of the word of God*, ²⁶*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," and what is the mystery? "...which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." That is the content of the mystery, "Christ in you." This is the indwelling Christ. The Messiah now indwells every believer. This was not revealed at all in the Old Testament. This is something different from the Spirit's indwelling. The Spirit's indwelling was something known in the Old Testament but that the Messiah would indwell believers was never revealed in the Old Testament. Therefore, as Arnold Fruchtenbaum says, "The fact that the Messiah now indwells every believer is the mystery unrevealed in the Old Testament."² The fact of the indwelling Messiah is the second mystery related to the Church.

The third mystery related to the Church is that the Church is the bride of Christ. Turn to Eph 5:22. There's a lot of good instruction here related to wives and husbands. So pay attention to the instruction, but understand that the primary teaching of the passage is with respect to the Church as the bride of Christ. "Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord." This means to submit, submit to your own husband as you would submit to the Lord. Verse 23 is the reason, "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church," there is an order or rank in marriage just as there is an order or rank in the Church. He is the head of the Church because He is "the Savior of the body" which is the Church. Verse 24, "But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives *ought to be* to their husbands in everything." Now we come to the husbands, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her," Husbands you are to love your wives just as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us. The reason He did this is verse 26, "so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word,²⁷ that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.²⁸ So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself;²⁹ for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also *does* the church,³⁰ because we are members of His body." Here's a definition of the Church again; the Church is the body of Messiah. Verse 31, For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."³² This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church." In other words, all this talk about husbands and wives is really to teach us about Christ and the church, and primarily that the Church is the bride of Christ. This is different from Israel in the OT because Israel was the wife of YHWH, but the Church is not the wife of YHWH but the bride of Christ, the Son specifically. Fruchtenbaum says, "In the Old testament, it was revealed that Israel was the wife of Jehovah, so this could not be the mystery. What was unrevealed in the Old Testament is the fact that the second person will have His own bride, which is the church." That is the content of the mystery. Verse 33, "Nevertheless, each individual among you also is to love his own wife even as himself, and the wife must *see to it* that she respects her husband." I hope you are doing that in your marriage because if you are your marriage is reflective of Christ and the Church, but if you are not it is not reflecting Christ and the Church. So the third mystery related to the Church is that the Church is the bride of Christ.

The fourth mystery related to the Church is that each local church is a lampstand that has a guardian angel. Turn to Rev 1:20. This was a revelation given by Jesus to John. In verse 20 we read, "As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." This mystery has two aspects. The first aspect is that the seven lampstands John saw represent seven churches. A seven branched lampstand stood for the menorah in the OT. That was not a mystery. But this seven-branched lampstand represents seven churches. This was something entirely new. The seven churches they represent are listed in Rev 2-3 as the church at Ephesus, the church at Smyrna, the church at Pergamum, the church at Thyatira, the church at Sardis, the church at Philadelphia and the church at Laodicea. These were all local churches. Each local church is pictured as a lampstand. And just as a lampstand sends forth light to its surroundings so each local church is to send forth light into its community. That is the first aspect of this mystery and it is very important. The second aspect of the mystery is that the seven stars are seven angels assigned to the seven churches. The Greek word *aggelos* is almost always a reference to angels and in the Book of Revelation it is always a reference to angels. That angels exist was well known during the OT period. That is not the mystery. The mystery is that angels would be assigned as guardians of local churches. Putting the two aspects of this mystery together we learn that each local church is to send forth light into its surroundings and that a guardian angel has been given to each church but that if the local church fails to send forth light then Christ will extinguish that church. That is the fourth mystery relative to the Church, each local church is a lampstand that has been issued a guardian angel.

The fifth and final mystery related to the Church that we will look at is the mystery of the translation of the Church. This one has major prophetic significance for our series. Turn to 1 Cor 15:50-58. This is the most important chapter on resurrection in the whole Bible. Paul gives evidences for resurrection in vv 1-19, the order of resurrection in vv 20-28, practical exhortation related to resurrection in vv 29-34 and the nature of the resurrection body in vv 35-49. If we look at v 23 we see an order of resurrection. "But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then comes the end..." The phrase "those who are Christ's" has only one other usage and one similar usage in the NT. Both refer exclusively to Church age believers (cf Gal 5:24; 1 Cor 6:15). So in verse 23 the order is Christ's resurrection followed by the Church age believer's resurrection. So far there has almost been 2,000 years since Christ's resurrection. But the main point is that Paul is talking about the Church age believer's resurrection. In verse 50 he returns to that topic when he says, "Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in 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." Verse 50 is saying that a non-resurrected person cannot rule in the kingdom of God. Therefore, they must be resurrected before reigning. In verse 51 we see the mystery, "we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." Clearly involved is a resurrection but the mystery cannot be resurrection since that was revealed clearly in the OT (Dan 12:2). Further,

the OT saints were to be raised at Christ's second coming. That was known. Therefore, the mystery is not that there will be a resurrection at the Second Coming. The content of the mystery is that of a resurrection of living saints and dead saints at a time other than the Second Coming. Therefore, one generation of Church saints will simply be changed from mortal bodies to immortal in an event separate from the Second Coming. We must all be changed so that we can reign in the kingdom. Verse 52 tells us how quickly the change will take place, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet..." The phrase "in a moment" is from *atomos*, from which we get "atom." It is a measurement of time that cannot be cut. The phrase "twinkling of an eye" means "blink of an eye." The change will take place so quickly that if one were to blink his eye he would miss it. This is the rapture or translation of the Church. And the important thing to realize is that this idea of a translation of living believers was a mystery. It was something never before revealed. And so it can't be the same as the resurrection at Christ's Second Coming. That was already revealed in the OT. But this is something new and we take it that it refers to a rapture of living Church age believers at a time distinct from the Second Coming.

In conclusion, what we have shown is that Paul's use of the word mystery is in terms of its usage in Dan 2, where something is hidden and inaccessible, but now revealed. There were mysteries concerning the kingdom, and these mysteries all revolve around the idea of postponement. There are also mysteries concerning the church. These mysteries occur within the Church and combine to show that the Church itself was a mystery. First, that the Church is Jew and Gentile united in one new man, one body, distinct from Israel and the Gentiles. Second, that Christ indwells every believer in the Church. Third, that the Church is the bride of Christ. Fourth, that each local church is a lampstand that has a guardian angel. Fifth, that one generation of the Church will not taste death but will be translated. This is the rapture. The fact that the Church is a mystery is part of the warrant for seeing the Rapture as distinct from the Second Coming. So next time we will start looking at four major passages on the Rapture.

For the prophetic picture to be fully appreciated, the distinction between Israel and the Church must be clear. The mystery doctrines make this distinction clear. We are not Israel or the Gentiles, we are the Church, and we have unique prophetic truths that relate to us.

¹ Renald Showers, *Maranatha, Our Lord Come*, 233.

² Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 275.