

Chapter 1

OUR MISSIONARY GOD AND HIS ETERNAL PURPOSES

Objectives: This chapter will introduce the theological framework for missions. By the conclusion of this chapter, we will recognize the eternal purposes of God

Do We Recognize the Unifying Theme of the Bible?

“What is the Bible all about?” asked the new believer. “Is there a common thread or emphasis which ties everything together? I have been reading different parts of the Bible and cannot discover any ideas which connect all the chapters.”

The dilemma of my friend is very common. Some mature believers would be unable to answer his question even though they have read through the entire Bible more than once. What is the Bible all about? Is there a unifying theme which runs through the Bible?

Fifty years ago many of the scientists of the world were engaged in a very specialized study. They were seeking to discover the “unifying factor” of all physical matter — the “glue” which held everything in the universe together in an organized way. Their research contributed a lot of new and fascinating information to the fields of physics and astronomy, but the “unifying factor” of the physical universe was not identified.

The Unifying Theme was Made Understandable to Us by Paul

It is the premise of this booklet that there is a unifying theme which runs from cover to cover of the Bible, and that this is a missionary theme. The Apostle Paul wrote about this theme in his letter to the Ephesian Church. We will begin with Ephesians 1:3-9.

In verse 3 Paul praised the Father ... “because He has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing.” In verses 4-8 Paul mentions some of those blessings: “He chose us ... before the creation of the world;” “He predestined us to be adopted as His sons;” “we have redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ” and “the forgiveness of sins.” Words such as “chosen”, “predestined”, “redeemed”, and “forgiven” are theological activities which are basic to our faith. The Father worked out all of these actions through His Son, Jesus Christ. With Paul we can offer our thanksgiving and praise to the Father for what He has done for us (see verses 15-19a).

The Father’s Purposes are Accomplished in Christ

The verses which focus on our unifying theme are in verses 8-10. Paul informs us that “with all wisdom and understanding, the Father made known to us the mystery of His will.” The following phrases inform us that this “mystery” was made known to us “according to His good pleasure,” that it was “purposed in Christ,” and that it was “to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment.” Finally, in the last part of verse 10, Paul gives us the purpose of this “mystery” — it is “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

Do you see the purpose of the Father in these verses? His purposes, which began before the creation of the world, will be brought together under the headship of Christ at some future time “when the times will have reached their fulfillment.” This would indicate that all of the plans and activities of the Father are directed to this significant accomplishment.

Believers are Included in the Purposes of the Father

The following verses in this letter develop from this theme. In verse 11 we read that the Father specifically chose us as individuals and predestined us “according to His plan.” Indeed the Father “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.” The remainder of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2 provide us with valuable and encouraging teaching. However, we are focusing our attention on the unifying theme of the Father’s purposes and activities and to do that we must jump ahead to chapter 3, verses 1-11.

Paul Explains His Special Understanding of the Purposes of God

In chapter 3 Paul begins to explain the reason for his ministry activities. He described himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles.” “Surely,” he wrote, “you have heard how the grace of God was given to me for you.” In verse 3 Paul explains that the working of God’s grace was part of a “mystery made known to me by revelation.” This is the second occurrence of this word “mystery” which, as we read in chapter 1, relates to the eternal purposes of God. Paul explains in verse 3 that his knowledge of this mystery was made known to him by revelation. In verse 4 Paul acknowledges that he had a unique “insight into the mystery of Christ.”

In verse 5 he explains that the mystery “was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.” We must be careful here to understand what Paul is saying. He is not stating that this mystery was not revealed to previous generations; he is stating that he was given, through a special revelation, the grace to understand the mystery in a more complete way than people in previous generations. In other words, there were some people in the Old Testament who were able to grasp the purposes and goals of God, although their understanding was incomplete and inferior to the fuller understanding of Paul.

The Purposes of the Father Involve the Body of Believers

What do we know about this mystery so far? Ephesians 1:10 explained that it was the Father’s will to “bring all things in heaven and on earth together under the headship of Christ.” I think we will agree that there is lots of evidence about this in the Old Testament, beginning with a promise given immediately after the disobedience of Adam and Eve. Additional promises were given to the various patriarchs and kings of the nation of Israel, and there was a substantial increase in the amount of information given to the prophets. There was enough information in the Old Testament for the sincere and faithful worshiper of Yahweh to understand the purposes of God in a general way.

What else do we know? From Ephesians chapters 1 and 2 we learned that individuals who are chosen, predestined, redeemed, and forgiven are included in the mystery. These individuals are “made alive in Christ” and “raised up with Christ and seated with Him in the heavenly realms” We read that this “body” of believers is part of this mystery. In 1:22 the purposes of the Father are once again clearly stated: “And God (the Father) placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to the head over everything for the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.”

Paul Emphasizes an Important Point: The Body Includes Both Jews and Gentiles

Ephesians 3: 6 clarifies another aspect of this mystery: the Church includes both Gentiles and Jews. “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.” There were a few clues about this in the Old Testament, but it was the privilege of Paul to reveal this part of the mystery to his readers. In chapter 2 Paul reminded his readers that “at that time,” during the time before salvation by grace was possible, the Gentiles were “separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus (those) who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” It was “for this reason” that Paul concentrated his ministry energies on the Gentiles (3:1-6). He wanted all Gentiles to know that they had equal access to the blessings in Christ. The Gospel message is a message of hope to all people.

Paul Restates the Objective of His Ministry

This unifying theme of mystery continues in verses 3:7-11. Verses 2 and 7 have a similar meaning; Paul was given grace to make the mystery of Christ known to the Gentiles. Not only did Paul desire “to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” but he was given grace “to make plain to everyone the outworking of this mystery.” The mystery should have been plain to the Jews before this time. Unfortunately most of them were blind to the purposes of God because of their sinful attitudes and dependence on their religious laws.

The Purposes of God are Eternal

The second half of verse 9 has a similar meaning to verse 5. The mystery in “ages past was kept hidden in God.” It was God’s intention “that now, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known.” The ways of God are from eternity. These ways are called “the wisdom of God” and verse 11 declares to us that these ways are “according to His eternal purposes which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Therefore we conclude that the mystery which has been revealed to us is a theme which began in eternity and is the unifying theme which runs throughout all of Scripture. The mystery is the plan of the Father which is worked out in many unique ways through His Son Jesus Christ.

The Biblical Meaning of the Word “Mystery”

It will be useful at this point to explain exactly what a “mystery” is. A lot of people enjoy mystery stories. These are stories in which the reader, and the detective in the story, tries to figure out the identity of the guilty person. The word “mystery” in the New Testament has a different meaning. Let me give some background to this meaning. In Paul’s lifetime, as today, there were organizations and guilds which had secret rules and information. Only members of the organization were permitted to know these special secrets; the secrets were not given to non-members and outsiders. The word “mystery” in the New Testament is like this. Only individuals who are “insiders” are able to understand the spiritual truths of the Bible, the ways of God. The mysteries of the Bible can only be understood by individuals who have received the Holy Spirit of God, after they are “initiated” into the family of God. This is explained in I Corinthians 2:6-14

“We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him’

but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

The “Mystery” of God’s Purposes is Revealed in Numerous Verses of Scripture

There are other passages which speak of this “mystery” theme. See Romans 16:25-26; Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 1:25-27, 2:2, 4:3; and Revelation 10:7. In all of these verses there is an underlying emphasis on the plan and purposes of God.

God’s Purposes are Revealed in Numerous Other Ways

There are yet more verses which provide information about the revealed purposes of God. Remember that there was evidence in the Old Testament which could have been understood by perceptive readers. For example, Luke chapter 24 refers to this Old Testament information.

Jesus Used Information From the Old Testament to Explain His Death and Resurrection

Luke 24 begins with a description of the resurrection of Jesus. Verse 13 is the beginning of the story about two individuals who were walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. You will remember that these people were discussing the events which had occurred during the previous three days. When Jesus joined them as they walked down the road, they reported to Him the reasons for their disappointment and perplexity. In verses 25-27 Jesus said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.”

The point here is that individuals who were faithful worshippers and students of the Old Testament Scriptures should have understood the death, burial, and resurrection of the Christ. Jesus gave them information from “all the Scriptures concerning Himself.” “Moses and all the Prophets” had written about Jesus.

Like the Travelers on the Road to Emmaus, We Need to Have Unlocked Minds and Burning Hearts

Those two travelers on the road to Emmaus had sufficient information available but they had not understood the words of the Scriptures. Like many believers today, they needed to have their minds opened to the truths in the Scriptures. Notice verses 31 and 32: “Their eyes were opened and they recognized Him (Jesus)” and “Did not our hearts burn within us when He ... opened the Scriptures?” Likewise, our hearts can “burn within us” when we see Jesus in all the Scriptures and realize that the plans of God had been made available for many centuries.

Another Example of Truth About God’s Eternal Plan Illuminating the Minds of Disciples

The following episode, Luke 24:36 – 48, occurred a short time later the same day. Jesus suddenly and supernaturally appeared in the midst of His disciples as they were meeting together. After Jesus showed them the scars on His hands and feet, He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.” In other words, Jesus was educating them about the information available in all parts of the Old Testament.

“Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” What information did He want them to know? He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.”

Application of Truth to the Disciples of Jesus

There are two important points to recognize in this passage. First, “Christ was to suffer and die.” The reason for the suffering and death was related to a second, greater issue — that all nations might repent and be forgiven. Both of these points referred to information in the Scriptures which had been available to the disciples. Although God's purpose was not generally understood, either by the many Israelites of the Old Testament era or by the early followers of Jesus, Jesus emphasized that this information was included in all parts of Scripture!

Jesus then stated, “You are witnesses of these things.” He “opened their minds” so that they could more fully understand the Word of God, and instructed them to travel to the nations to announce His death and to proclaim the Good News of repentance and forgiveness which was available to everyone as the result of His death. This is the message of the missionary.

Conclusion: The Followers of Jesus Are Expected to Work for the Fulfillment of God's Purposes

The instructions of Jesus perfectly fit into the plans and purposes of the Father. These plans were formulated before creation began and were made available throughout human history. These plans were hidden to non-believers but insiders could have, and should have, known and recognized the mystery of God — “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.”

In the next chapter we will continue to examine the purposes of God.

End chapter 1