

THE LETTERS TO THE EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS - PART IV

LIVING OUT THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

I. Chapter 3 of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians continues the doctrinal section and reflects upon his own ministry to the nations and desire for God to bring even greater understanding to them.

A. Having described God's calling to the Gentiles, St. Paul then turns to his own ministry for this purpose.

1. At the beginning and end of this reflection, he refers to his own imprisonment and afflictions, but says they are for the glory of God.

2. St. Paul refers over and over again to the ministry given to him.

- As the letter to the Colossians did, verse 2 calls this ministry a "stewardship of God's grace," the implication being that God gave him a treasure to invest wisely, and he is now trying to do so. See Col. 1:25; cf. Matt. 24:45-51, 25:1-30; Luke 19:12-27. As verses 8 and 12, emphasize, for St. Paul the focus is mostly on preaching and making the power of God more known. See also 1 Cor. 1:17.

- St. Paul refers to a vision he had of the mystery of God's salvation. That vision could refer to his initial conversion, or a later vision that explained the way of salvation more.

3. There is a continual emphasis on the "mystery" of God's providence, now manifested to the nations.

- Theologically, a mystery is something that is accessible only through God's providence, and special revelation. It cannot be accessed by reason alone, but rather only by the grace of God. And, on a related point, the mysteries of God are often described by symbols because their full reality is greater than words can describe. Cf. Catechism 36-38; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Part I, question 1 articles 1, 9. The term is used three times in this passage and six times in the letter as a whole. It is a special theme of St. Paul, used 23 times in his letters, especially here, in First Corinthians and Colossians.

- Thus, Jesus said that He spoke the parables to express the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but even then they could only be known through the special gift of God, given first to His disciples. See Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-20; Luke 8:9-10.

- Now the Church refers to the sacraments and liturgy in general as mysteries for the reveal and confer in symbols the mysterious grace of God. See Catechism 1115, 1139

- The idea of a mystery would have been familiar to the Gentiles, for there was a strong notion of mystery rites, which would give one access to the supernatural realm. The most famous of these rites were the Eleusinian mysteries celebrated in Eleusius, a city near Athens. However, unlike those rites, which were symbolic and had little moral implications (except that a murderer could not participate in them), the mysteries that St. Paul speaks of involve a personal relationship with Jesus and a fundamental transformation of life. That holiness is needed to understand them. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 2:6-10; see also Is. 6:8-10; Wis. 2:21-22. Furthermore, they are not kept secret but proclaimed to the world through the Church.

4. The revelation is made known first to the apostles and "holy prophets," and through them to the church. The prophets could mean the prophets of ancient Israel and/or a new office of prophesy in the Church, which helps deepen the people's understanding of the faith. See Ephesians 4:11; 1 Cor. 14:1-12

- There is an emphasis of revelation through the Church. People do not come to understand the mysteries of God alone.

- Verse 10 indicates that even the powers in the heavens learn more of Jesus through the Church. Cf. 1 Pet. 1:12.

B. In verses 14-21, St. Paul then turns toward a prayer, in which he asks God to give the people even more understanding.

1. He begins by referring to God as Father, and saying that every family is named after Him, thus introducing the theme of marriage as imitating divine love, a theme he will return to in chapter 5. Part of the idea is that every family deserves to be called such because and to the extent that it imitates this divine love. See Matt. 23:9; Vatican II Council, Gaudium et Spes 50, paragraph 2.

2. St. Paul continues with the image of the riches of heaven poured out upon the people to strengthen them. The Old Testament had frequently promised prosperity to the people if they heeded the voice of God, see, e.g., Duet. 7:12-15; 28:11-14; Is. 60; Haggai 2:6-9, and Jesus had promised even great treasures to those who sacrificed to follow Him. See Matt. 19:29; Mark 10:29-31. Here we see these treasures as greater than those of earth, leading one to rejoice and have power in the eternal and celestial realm.

3. St. Paul continues the prayer by asking that the faithful become dwelling places of Christ, and that they continue to increase their knowledge of the vastness (height, depth, length, breadth) of God's love. It expands further that they "know" the love that surpasses knowledge. The idea is that there is a knowledge by experience and presence greater than anything that can be described or known in theoretical terms. Cf. 1 Cor. 2:9; 13:12-13.

4. This section concludes with a call to give glory to God in Jesus and in His Church. There is the expansive reference to God's power as working more than we can ask or imagine. The idea is that, even with the fullness of revelation, our minds are simply not capable of comprehending all of God's plans.

II. The first sixteen verses of chapter 4 then conclude the doctrinal section and begin the moral section with a reflection on the unity of the Church.

A. Reminding the people again that he is imprisoned for the faith, St. Paul calls for Christians to live the calling we have already received. Here as elsewhere, St. Paul focuses on the theme of being who we already are.

B. Verses 2-6 then continue on with the theme of unity in the Church.

- The letter describes the effects of love similar to those in 1 Corinthians 13 and Colossians 3, here emphasizing the virtues that especially unify the Church.

- Verses 4-6 describe seven perfections of the unity in the Church. Three of them are Trinitarian, there is one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father of all. Two of them, faith and hope, combine with the love described in verses 1-3 to make up the theological virtue. The other two perfections, being one body and having one baptism, express the faith in symbolic terms, that of the mystical body and through the symbolism of the sacraments.

C. Verses 7-16 then turn to the diversity of gifts given in the Church, and how they are still an expression of unity.

1. He begins with the overall theme of God giving each person the grace fitted for the gifts he has received from Christ. He adds to the list from Corinthians the office of pastor, which is Greek and Latin for shepherd. While that office is not referred to by name elsewhere in the New Testament, it builds upon the calls for leaders to act as shepherds. See John 21:15-18; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:7; see also 1 Kings 22:17; Ps. 78:71; Jer. 23:1-4; Ez. 34.

2. The passage then quotes and interprets Psalm 68, especially verse 19. The psalm describes God's conquering power, ending with a note of triumph as all nations come before God. The idea seems is that the Psalmist described God coming to earth in His power to overcome all nations and transform them into lands that would glorify in worshiping Him. Now Jesus Christ is God come to earth to make all earthly powers, gifts, talents, etc. work for His glory. And, precisely by being offered for His glory, all things become full.

3. Then, as with First Corinthians 12, St. Paul continues on with a brief description of certain offices in the Church, all meant for the building up of the Church, the body of Christ

- St. Paul here adds the idea of the Church maturing from childhood to manhood. The image is of the church growing throughout time as a human does, gaining wisdom, insight and strength.

- He also compares people who get swept away by mere human teaching to infants who cannot focus on anything for long. Then as now, people who adopt the latest fads would probably think of themselves as mature because they go with what is currently fashionable.

III. The next section, from verse 17 of chapter 4 to verse 20 of chapter 5 give a general commentary on the moral life needed for a Christian.

A. The passage begins with a call to live out the knowledge we have received, in contrast to the darkness of understanding outside.

1. St. Paul blames a "hardness of heart" for this ignorance, and argues that this hardness of heart then leads to callousness and to vice. He is not saying that every person who is ignorant of the Gospel is blameworthy, but is pointing out that

ignorance is often not innocent, but rather due to a desire not to live with the demands of the truth.

2. Here, as in Romans, St. Paul says that ignorance leads people to give themselves to impurity, presumably thinking that it is a type of freedom, or despairing of any real freedom over desires. See Rom. 1:18-32; see also Wis. 14:21-31. Ignorance is not simply an intellectual matter, but has moral consequences.

3. An immoral life is not how one "learns Christ." The learning here is not just intellectual learning about Jesus Christ, but a matter of holiness, being with Jesus Himself and knowing Him personally. Isaiah and Jeremiah had said that in the new covenant each of the faithful would know God. See Is. 54:13; Jer. 31:34. St. Paul is describing the fulfillment of this promise in a life of holiness.

4. As with Colossians, St. Paul then turns to the image of taking off the new self and putting on Christ. The idea is that a life of holiness is as a glorious garment, while the ill deeds of this world are like a soiled, or at least inappropriate one. See Col. 3:12-14; cf. Matt. 22:11-13; Rev. 19:8; Is. 64:4-5; Zech. 3:3-5.

B. The next passage, from verse 25 of chapter 4 to verse 5 of chapter 5 gives a list of vices to be avoided and virtues to be practiced.

1. This list bears some similarity to the lists of virtues and vices in Colossians and Galatians. See Col. 3:5-17; Gal. 6:16-26. But here, in verses 25 to 32, there is more of an effort to match specific vices with the virtue that is needed to overcome them.

2. The letter adds a specific comment on the distinction between anger and anger leading to sin, indicating that the former can be permissible. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that anger makes one liable to judgment, but this passage indicates that His meaning was more that anger makes judgment for sin a danger, but not necessarily that it is sin. See Matt. 5:21-22. By saying that the sun should not set on one's anger, St. Paul seems specifically to be warning about brooding on injuries. It is very possible that St. Paul is concerned either about an excess of anger or about laxness.

3. There is also a very personal note against "grieving the Holy Spirit" through fury, bitterness and the like. Although it is anthropomorphic, the makes the command more poignant by giving an idea that one is causing God sorrow or anger. The idea seems to be that, because we are sealed with the Holy Spirit and He dwells in us, an offense against fellow Christians

is an offense against the Holy Spirit.

4. Verses 1 and 2 call for nothing less than an imitation of God and of Jesus Christ. The passage presents Christ's sacrifice as a sweet smelling offering, a reference to the offering of a ram or grain in the Jewish sacrifices. See Ex. 29:18; Lev. 2:2-12. Ezekiel said that, if Israel repents, God will accept the country as a sweet smelling offering, a promise that is fulfilled in Jesus and here presented as a goal. See also Phil. 4:18; Heb. 13:15.

5. St. Paul also strongly warns against speaking about evil, for it will drag one downward, and away from the thanksgiving we ought to be giving.

6. St. Paul concludes this warning with a clear statement that immorality, impurity, and greed are forms of idolatry, thus implying a rejection of the faith and loss of one's inheritance in the kingdom of heaven. There is for St. Paul no radical severance between faith and morality, for there can be no faith that does not seek to avoid sins.

C. St. Paul concludes this section with a call to live in the light, as opposed to darkness. Part of the idea is that sinfulness springs from a failure to sense things from the light of heaven, but being deceived that this world is all that exists, and consequently believing sins are not punished if kept secret.

1. This duality of light and darkness is also a common theme of St. John. See, e.g., John 1:4-5, 8-9, 3:19-21, 8:12, 9:4; 1 John 1:5-6.

2. St. Paul (or perhaps a hymn he is quoting) seems to be referring to the prophecies of Isaiah regarding the dead rising again and the restoration of Israel when he calls for the sleepers to awake in verse 14. Part of the idea is that those who live in vice are simply oblivious to the supernatural realm and need to be awakened from the desires of this world, which are as ethereal as dreams.

3. St. Paul continues with a contrast between drunkenness, on the one hand and making music and giving thanks to God in the Spirit on the other. The idea may be that drunkenness is a corrupt version of the joyfulness and excitement that should come from worship in the Spirit.

IV. As the letter to the Colossians had done, this letter then turns to the care of a household.

A. The advice for husbands and wives is similar to that of Colossians, but more expansive. See Col. 3:18-19; see also 1 Pet. 3:1-7.

1. The advice begins with the call to be submissive to one another. As with Colossians, it then directs specific advice to husbands and wives, most likely in the direction where it will be more of a struggle, i.e. submissiveness for wives and purifying love for husbands.

2. The passage then describes the love of husband and wife as both the restoration of the primordial order described in Genesis and as an image of the love between Christ and His Church.

- St. Paul begins by quoting Genesis as the basis for marriage at the beginning. Likewise, as a first promise of the restoration of primordial order, Jesus performed His first miracle at a wedding. See John 2:1-12.

- John the Baptist and, by implication, Jesus Himself, described Christ as the bridegroom. See Mat. 9:15; John 3:29. This passage, and later the Book of Revelation, complete the image by describing the Church as His bride. See Rev. 19:7-9, 21:2, 9-10.

B. The section then gives advice for parents and children along lines similar to that of Colossians. See Col. 3:20-21. St. Paul adds an emphasis that this rule comes with a promise of long life. This long life could be that of the individual, for a healthy family is a provision for old age. The Old Testament theology would also be that the long life is also that of the family and the community; the individual who has a good family and community will live on in them. St. Paul is probably adding by implication that this command is also a way to eternal life for oneself and one's family.

C. The advice to slaves and master is also similar to that in Colossians. See Col. 3:22-25; see also 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-25. The advice repeats more often the call to work for God, not primarily human beings, and thus receive great recompense in labor. St. Paul more plainly specifies the command that masters not bully their servants.

V. The letter then turns to a description of the Christians life as a battle against evil.

A. Verse 10 gives the overall theme that the strength comes from God; we should not rely only on our own power or even that of

the community.

B. Part of the idea is that the fallen angels are as an enemy trying to take over our souls, and we must resist them, individually and as a church, with all, and even more, of the courage, self-sacrifice, and unity of soldiers defending their land.

C. Using the imagery of a Roman soldier, St. Paul calls for all Christians to use all of the weapons and armor of God available, not neglecting anything, in order to avoid sin and make conquests for holiness.

D. There is a reflection of the image in Isaiah and the Book of Wisdom of God coming personally as a soldier against those who attack justice. See Is. 59:17; Wis. 5:17-21. In Jesus Christ, this image became literal fact, and St. Paul calls for us to act in imitation of Him.