

The Book of Ephesians

Ephesians 3:2-6

Session Twenty-three: The Revelation of the Mystery (cont.)

Today, we will sort through Paul's digression (of the mystery) which turns out to be very instructive.

Ephesians 3:2 If ye have heard of the **dispensation of the grace of God** which is given me to you-ward:

We are about to expand our understanding of the acronym DoGG.

Verse 2 introduces the dispensation of the grace of God. This term "dispensation of the grace of God" (DoGG1) is synonymous with the "dispensation of Gentile grace" (DoGG2). Both terms refer to the same time period and the same program. They are merely emphasizing two different aspects of the dispensational change: the DoGG1 emphasizes "grace" as opposed to the law, and DoGG2 emphasizes that God is now dealing with "Gentiles," as opposed to Israel only.

I am still going to write it as DoGG, only now we will understand this acronym to include both aspects of dispensational change – from law to grace, and from Israel to Gentiles.

Let's talk about the "dispensation of the grace of God." The first thing to do is define the word "dispensation." Words have meanings and we do not want to get sloppy with the language as that may lead us into error or, at least, keep us from deeper truth.

Technically speaking, a dispensation is not a period of time. It refers to the particular way in which God is administering over things. It is true that any dispensation takes place "in time," but it is not actually a time, in and of itself.

Of the 16 definitions of the word "dispensation," five of them were in use prior to 1611.

c1374–
dispensation, n.

Ordering, management; esp. the divine administration or conduct of the world; the ordering or arrangement of events by divine providence.

c1384–
dispensation, n.

The orderly administration of things committed to one's charge; the function or office of administrator or steward; stewardship.

a1387–

dispensation, n.

The action of dispensing or dealing out; distribution or administration to others; expenditure, spending, or disbursement (of money); economical use or disposal (of anything).

A dispensation is a dispensing of something, or it is a system of administration or management. And sometimes, it may include both of these. Dispensations are administrations of truth which God has dispensed during a period of time. You have often heard me say it this way: a dispensation is the way in which a householder arranges his household.

In vs. 2, Paul is saying that God commissioned him to be a “dispenser” of His grace in the outworking of “the mystery of Christ.” This does not mean that God was never gracious in time past, or never demonstrated grace to individuals; of course He did. It means that the law, the performance of Israel to obey the law, was the primary means by which God dealt with them. But those instances of grace did not violate the overall principle of the law, which led progressively through the courses of punishment.

What Paul is saying in vs. 2 is that grace is now the primary means by which God is dealing with the world, as opposed to the law, which was a performance system with immediate curses and blessings. Grace is now the means by which God deals with individuals; it is the means by which God is administrating to the world; both lost and saved.

What are the implications of a dispensation of grace? God is not arranging punishments for the world today, nor is He arranging blessings for certain nations over others. God is not choosing to “bless” one person over another. God is not choosing to punish one person instead of another.

Grace is a free gift. Grace is never distributed by merit, as that is no longer grace. Things given by grace have nothing to do with the recipient. Grace is unconditional. This is how we know that what God is doing now has to do with our inward man and not in our physical circumstances.¹

Our apostle tells us there has been a dispensational change. At the heart of dispensationalism is to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).

The word “dispensation” shows up four times in the Bible, all of them in the New Testament (NT) and all of them in Paul’s epistles.

Paul says that the DoGG was given to him, so that he could give it to the Ephesians, and by extension, to everyone in the body of Christ.

¹ Ephesians, Sessions 4 and 5 address the spiritual blessings we have been given

Ephesians 3:3 How that **by revelation he made known unto me the mystery;** (as I wrote afore in few words, ⁴ Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)

We have always lived in a DoGG. It has been in effect for about 2,000 years. But understand that prior to Paul, it was the law and things were different.

Paul wants to educate the Ephesians with the knowledge that the Lord Jesus taught him about “the mystery.”

Why does Paul refer to this as “the mystery?” It is called that because God thought of it and ordained it before anything was created. At that time, God decided to keep it a secret until it was time to reveal it. Therefore, it was a mystery in that it was not known. Paul calls it God’s “hidden wisdom.”

1 Corinthians 2:7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even **the hidden wisdom**, which God ordained before the world unto our glory:

It was a secret which God “hid in Himself.”

Ephesians 3:9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of **the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God**, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

Colossians 1:26 Even **the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations**, but now is made manifest to his saints:

No one, outside of God, had any idea about the mystery. The first one to hear about the mystery was Paul, after his conversion. Keeping the mystery a secret was crucial to God’s plan to defeat Satan.

1 Corinthians 2:7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: ⁸ Which none of the princes of this world knew: for **had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.**

The “princes of this world” is not a reference to human rulers, but to Satan’s realm (those rebellious principalities and powers which joined with him) which ruled over the earth and the people in it.

When the time was right, God interrupted His prophetic program with Israel, and began to deal with the world in a completely different kind of way. He did this by ushering the Dispensation of the Grace of God, the mystery of Christ.

Ephesians 3:5 Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

Notice the order: apostles first and then prophets, which tells us these are those with the spiritual gifts given at the beginning of the DoGG for the edification of the body of Christ before the scriptures of Paul were written and completed. Those are the apostles and prophets that God gave to the body of Christ when He ascended up on high and “gave gifts to men.” Those gifts began to wane as Paul wrote his letters and ended completely with Paul’s writing of 2 Timothy which, according to Colossians 1:25, is the last NT book written.

Colossians 1:25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, **to fulfil the word of God;**

Now, let’s pick back up in Ephesians 3.

Ephesians 3:5 **Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men**, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

Since there were no available scriptures for this new dispensation, God gave supernatural gifts to each local assembly for the edification of the saints. These included the apostles and prophets.

Ephesians 4:8 Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.⁹ (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?¹⁰ He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.)¹¹ **And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;**¹² For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

Since Paul, at the beginning of the DoGG, had not yet written any of the books of the NT, we can see that God gave these supernatural gifts of the Spirit for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Ephesians 3:6 That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:

Verse 6 talks about an aspect of what was not revealed in other ages (because that is not what God was doing in the time past of Israel’s program) but is now the way God is dealing with things. (Notice, verse 6 is part of the same sentence with the first five verses, so it is directly connected.)

Ephesians 3:1 For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,² If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward:

³ **How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery;** (as I wrote afore in few words,⁴ Wherby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)⁵ Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; ⁶ **That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:**

Notice how vs. 3 is constructed grammatically. The first phrase (prior to the semi-colon) connects directly with vs. 6, “That the Gentiles...” Part b of vs. 3, vs. 4, and vs. 5 are parenthetical to the main thought of the sentence.

Everything in orange is parenthetical, that is, it does not tell you what the mystery is, but only tells us about the mystery (it was not previously made known, etc.).

The blue is the main sentence and defines the mystery. We can read the part in blue by leaving out the part in orange and the sentence will still make perfect sense.

For example, Paul could have left out all the parenthetical material and just wrote: “How that by revelation He made known unto me the mystery, That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.”

So, Paul says three things, that Gentiles should be:

1. fellowheirs
2. of the same body
3. partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel

Let’s start with the Gentiles being fellowheirs. “Fellowheirs” means that they have an inheritance together with someone else. Are the Gentiles fellowheirs with Israel? With the believing remnant (BR)? Are they fellowheirs with Christ? I think the answer to all of these is “no.”

Instead, I think, because of the context, that Paul is saying that Gentile members of the body of Christ are fellowheirs with Jewish members of the body of Christ. Let me explain.

Paul, who was Jewish, was the first member of the body of Christ. Because of Paul’s commission to go to the Jew first, many of the first members of the body of Christ were Jews.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; **to the Jew first**, and also to the Greek.

As was Paul’s custom, when he came into a city, his first stop was always the Jewish synagogue where Paul would tell them about the dispensational change.

- 1) He would explain that their prophetic program was on hold and God was no longer working with Israel the way He did before. Now, God is working in a different way.
- 2) Next, he would explain (often from the Old Testament) that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ and His death on the cross provided redemption in that it paid for the sins of the world.
- 3) Then, Paul would explain that the gospel of salvation is faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross to satisfy God’s justice against men’s sins.
- 4) Paul would explain that, since Israel in this dispensation of Gentile grace no longer enjoys favored nation status with God but has been [as a nation] lowered to the status of the Gentiles (that is the “fall of Israel” spoken of in Romans 11), that the gospel of the grace of God is not for Jews only, but also for Gentiles.

Paul's message, accompanied by the signs and wonders of an apostle, convinced some Jews to believe his gospel and upon their faith in Christ, they became members of the body of Christ.

It is with these saved members of the body of Christ that Paul has in mind when he writes that the Gentiles are now fellowheirs.

Gentiles who believed Paul's gospel are fellowheirs with Jews who believed Paul's gospel, and as such, are part of the same body, which is the second item in vs. 6.

Some versions of the Bible, in this verse, have us Gentiles being fellowheirs with Israel. The body of Christ and Israel are two separate entities. First of all, not all Israel is saved. But Paul is not talking about members of the believing remnant of Israel either, for they will inherit the earth. We, as members of the body of Christ, do not inherit the earth, but our future vocation is in the heavenly places.

The last thing on the list is that we are "partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel." What is that promise? It is the promise of eternal life which is ours by virtue of believing Paul's gospel.

Ephesians 3:7 Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

Paul ends this long sentence which began back up in vs. 1, by pointing to the power of God in saving him and making him a minister.

Before we leave this session, I want to raise and answer one question: Why did God need Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles? After all, by the time Paul is saved, "the twelve" had already been called, appointed and given a commission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Just prior to His ascension, the Lord Jesus told the apostles they would be witnesses sent out into all the world.

Acts 1:8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus gave them commission to take the gospel to the Gentile nations.

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. ¹⁹ Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

Mark 16:15 And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

So, if God had already commissioned the 12 to do this, why did God intercept Saul, save him, and call him to be the apostle to the Gentiles?

The answer is simple: There was dispensational change. The “12” were apostles under God’s program with Israel. But God interrupted that program in Acts 7 (when Stephen sees Jesus standing – vs. 56) and ushered in the dispensation of the grace of God in Acts 9 with the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

This new mystery program was not part of Israel’s prophetic program, as it was kept secret from the foundation of the world.

Romans 16:25 Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began,

The gospel changed from the gospel of the kingdom to the gospel of the grace of God.

Galatians 1:11 But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. ¹² For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught *it*, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

God is no longer working with the BR of Israel but He is working with both Jews and Gentiles equally and without distinction as members of the body of Christ.

So, getting back to our point; the reason for Paul is so that God could give inspired scripture to the members of the body of Christ to explain how God is dealing with us in this DoGG. If it was the same as in the time of Israel’s program, then there would have been no need for a new dispensation or new scriptures or a new apostle. But God needed all of those so that there was no violation of the prophetic program.

And you can’t have the old apostles writing the new scriptures for that would have them contradicting their previous doctrine and that would be utter confusion and chaos. They are members of the little flock and their apostleship will always be in accordance with who they are – members of the believing remnant of Israel.

Once this DoGG is over, God will resume and complete his prophetic program with Israel and then what was written by the apostles of Israel’s program will be in force once again.