



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Ephesians 3:1-13

“Dispensation of Grace of God” -- TRANSCRIPT

We have been looking for a number of weeks now at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, and we have just finished the section in the second chapter in which the Apostle has spoken of how, through the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, there has been brought about a reconciliation between the Jews and the Gentiles, and between the Jews and Gentiles and the Lord God. He had said in verse 15, “Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments, contained in ordinances, to make in himself of two, one new man, so making peace.” So now in Ephesians chapter 3, the Apostle will point out the character of the one body, the one new man: the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And what he will point out in Ephesians chapter 3, is that the Jew and the Gentile now have in the body of Christ is something new, something that was not known in Old Testament times. He says in the fifth verse, “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.” You might expect the Apostle to launch into a prayer after that great section, chapter 2 verse 11 through verse 22, because it concludes with this statement of the remarkable relationship that we bear to the Lord. He says, “In Whom ye also are built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” Well, nothing could be more

wonderful than to conceive of the church of Jesus Christ as a people who are the habitation of God through the Spirit.

And I rather think that the Apostle intended at this point to launch into the prayer, which he finally does launch into with verse 14 and following, in the third chapter. And I’d like to tell you why I think that he probably intended to begin the prayer as he begins chapter 3: “For this cause I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles.” Because this word translated in verse 22 of chapter 2, “an habitation of God,” is the same root that we find in chapter 3 verse 17, that Christ may “dwell” in your hearts by faith. So, I rather think that what the Apostle intended to do, was to reach this great climax – the Jews and Gentiles are now reconciled to the Lord and they’re reconciled to each other in this one body of the church – and at this point he wanted to pray that that which has come to pass might be realized in their experience. “For this cause, I Paul”—and notice verse 14 begins, “For this cause I bow my knees unto the father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” So I think that word habitation of the Lord by the Spirit had gripped him, and he intended to pray now that Christ would dwell in our hearts in this deep way suggested by this word, and that would be the burden of his prayer.

But, as is so often the case in Paul’s writing, he began the verse by saying, “For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,” and that launched him into a kind of parenthetical discussion of the relationship between the Jews and Gentiles in the one body. William Kelly, one of the commentators on the Epistle to the Ephesians, has said, “It’s very fitting for the Apostle to introduce God’s parenthetical dealing with the Jews and Gentiles being one with Christ in the present age by means of a grammatical parenthesis.” Well, that’s an interesting comment, I don’t know whether that’s really what the Holy Spirit intended or not, but that’s something we have.

Well no wonder this truth was glorious to the Apostle Paul. Just think of what has transpired. In chapter 2 verse 1 through verse 3, he said in times past we walked according to the course of this world. We walked according to the prince of the power of

the air, the spirit that now worketh in the sons of disobedience among whom we all had our manner of life in times past, in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath as others.

Now these same people of whom he says these things are the ones of whom he says in verse 22 “In whom ye also are built together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.” This is an almost infinite distance between children of wrath and now the dwelling place of the Lord God himself. And this is traceable to the grace of God. So I’m not surprised, then, that the Apostle should want to pray about this giving thanks and also urging the Lord through the Spirit to bring to pass in our Christian experience this wonderful relationship that we have with the Lord.

Now if I may just sum up these verses in three ways, I think that what the Apostle speaks about in the first six verses may be called “Paul and the Mystery.” And then, in verse 7 through verse 9 we have “Paul and the Ministry of the Mystery.” And finally, in verse 10 through verse 16 we have “Paul and the Motivation” of the mystery, or the motivation of the ministry of the mystery.

So let’s look now, first of all, at Paul and the Ministry. And what we have here is a kind of outline of his ministry to the Gentiles: “For this cause, I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ.” Now think about that for a moment, and I think you’ll see that the Apostle’s way of looking at things is not the way that we look at things. What was the Apostle at that point? Well, he was not outwardly a prisoner of Jesus Christ, but he was a prisoner. He was really a prisoner of the Romans. He was in Roman confinement. So, if he were to speak in reality, we might say, he would have said, “For this cause, I, Paul, a prisoner of the Romans for you Gentiles.”

But the Apostle looked at things from the divine standpoint. And while he as the prisoner of the Romans, he really was the prisoner of Jesus Christ. That’s the thing that means far more for the Apostle Paul than “prisoner of the Romans,” because he recognizes that it is by the sovereignty of God that he is where he is. He’s the prisoner of

Jesus Christ for the Gentiles.” Why? Because God had appointed him an Apostle to bring the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

Now, he continues, “If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you.” Dispensation of the grace of God: God’s arrangement concerning the grace of God that was given to the Apostle Paul particularly as his special ministry.

In the Epistle to the Galatians, remember, in the second chapter, the Apostle says he went up to Jerusalem, he saw the leaders there, the pillars of the church, and they didn’t add anything to him. They didn’t require a different kind of Gospel from that which he had been preaching. They acknowledged that he had been preaching the true Gospel. They gave him the right hand of fellowship. And they agreed among themselves that Peter would go to the Jews, or the circumcision, and the Apostle would go to the Gentiles, or the uncircumcision. In other words, they had an informal, Christian kind of agreement that the Apostle Paul, as he had been called by our Lord, would have as his field of ministry the Gentiles. That’s what he’s talking about here when he says “If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you.” God’s arrangement concerning his grace as it is manifested to the Gentiles.

Now he calls it the dispensation of the grace of God, not the dispensation of the Law of Moses. Nor the dispensation of the millennial kingdom, but the dispensation of the grace of God.

And he explains what that means in the verses that follow: this wonderful, equal arrangement that exists in the church of Jesus Christ today. The Jewish Age, or the age of the Mosaic Law, was a legal age. Israel was under the law. They were required to perform the ceremonies. Now they were not saved by that. The Bible makes very plain that there’s one way of salvation, and that through the Lord Jesus Christ.

But God, in order to educate Israel, put them under the Mosaic Law. It was their schoolmaster, Paul says in Galatians chapter 3, their slave guardian to bring them to faith

in Christ. Regardless of what we may say about the teaching of the Word of God and the relationship of the dispensationalism and covenant theology, we have to acknowledge, it seems to me, that there is a distinct change that has taken place in the present age, between the age under the law of Israel and the present age in which the church of Jesus Christ is not under the law as a code. In fact, this can be called a change of dispensations. And to that extent, the Scriptures at least, are dispensational in their significance.

H.A. Ironside, the pastor of Moody Church and one of the great Bible teachers of a generation or so ago, used to illustrate the change of a dispensation by a maid who worked for a laborer. Well, she was a very good maid, and when the wealthy banker who lived on the hill not too far away lost his maid, his wife looked around for a maid to take the place of the maid they had lost. And word somehow came to her that the maid of this laborer was a very good worker. And so she hired her. And she came to work. And she was used to working for the laborer.

So, on the first morning of her work, they installed her in one of the houses on the property of this very wealthy man. So on the first morning she comes in at 6:30 and rings a bell, and shouts out that is breakfast is on the table. And of course, everyone [is] shocked out of their sleep. They weren’t used to getting up – he’s a banker; he’s not used to getting up until 9 o’clock. And so, not only that, he finally staggers downstairs, and she says also, “I not only have breakfast on the table, but I have your lunch over here.” And there’s a sack – a sack lunch. And she said, “Now if you don’t hurry up and eat you’re going to miss your bus.”

And of course he has to sit down and say, “Now we don’t get up at 6:30 in the morning here. I’m a banker. And I observe banker’s hours. I get up about 8:30 or 9, and furthermore I have my dinner at the club. And so far as getting to work is concerned, Jeeves will drive me to work at 10 o’clock this morning in our Cadillac.” So, the maid, learns dispensational truth, Dr. Ironside used to say.

Well now, when the cross took place, a change of ages took place. The Mosaic Law was done away with. We are no longer under the Mosaic code. There is a very distinct difference now between the Gentile and his relationship to Israel, because now, for the first time, he’s in the body of Christ, in the redeemed company, on an absolutely equal basis with the Jews who have been saved in Old Testament times.

That, I think, is what the Apostle is talking about here when he goes on to say, “If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me toward you, how that by revelation he made known unto me the secret, (as I wrote before in few words, by which, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the secret of Christ).” Now of course we know that the term mystery does not mean something mysterious, but it rather refers to a divine truth which is known by revelation. That is, it’s only as a result of divine revelation that we know this truth. The Bible speaks of several mysteries, and these are divine truths which have been revealed by God, and cannot be understood apart from divine revelation.

Now in verses 5 and 6, “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.”—the mystery. And he says, it was, “in other ages which was not made known unto the sons of men as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.” There have been different opinions of what is meant by the Apostle when he writes verses 5 and 6. Covenant theologians – let me just, for a moment, explain to you what is meant by the term, “covenant theology.”

“Covenant theology” is a system of theology that arose largely through the Calvinists in Holland. It’s usually traceable historically to that particular part of Europe and to their particular doctrine. Now there are differences of opinion among covenant theologians. But generally speaking, covenant theologians look at the Bible in the light of three covenants. First of all, the everlasting covenant of redemption – the everlasting covenant of redemption being made through the persons of the Trinity, the Father, the

Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father covenanting to do his particular part of the work of redemption, the Son doing his part, and the Spirit to do his part. The Father to elect, the Son to redeem by his saving work, the Holy Spirit to apply the work of redemption. Now, the Bible does speak of such an arrangement, it would seem, because the Bible speaks in passages like Titus chapter 1 of the promise of life. Dr. Lewis Barry Schaeffer, who was known for dispensational theology, has in his theology acknowledged, that the covenant, the eternal covenant of redemption, is a doctrine required by an inference, or a study of the particular verses that apply to this particular kind of arrangement. He himself acknowledged the validity of that.

The second covenant in covenant theology is the covenant of works. Now, the covenant of works was an arrangement between the Lord and Adam in the Garden of Eden. Sometimes it is called the Edenic Covenant, sometimes by covenant theologians it is said that it is not really a covenant at all, but usually, covenant theologians speak of that arrangement in the Garden of Eden between the Lord and Adam as a covenant. That is, Adam was to do certain things and the Lord would do certain things if Adam obeyed. He was given a certain command. He was permitted to eat of all of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but of the fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden he was not to eat of that, for in the day that he ate of that, he would die. This arrangement, an arrangement in which God was to supply certain things, and Adam was to supply obedience, and certain blessings or threats were involved.

The third covenant in covenant theology is the covenant of grace. Now the covenant of grace in covenant theology is regarded as the covenant made between the Trinity and the elect. So we have the eternal covenant of redemption, between the persons of the Trinity, the covenant of works, between Adam and the Lord God, and then the covenant of grace, made between the triune God and the elect. And by this third covenant, the covenant of grace, God covenants to save the elect, through the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and the application of that work by the Holy Spirit.

Covenant theologians, as a general rule, conceive of the whole of the Bible gathered around the unfolding of these theological covenants. Associated with this, however, are certain other views. One of the views, ordinarily associated with covenant theology, is the view that the promises of the Old Testament that were made to the Nation Israel are, in the New Testament, the same promises that are given to the church, and therefore, there is a transformation of the meaning of the Old Testament promises, so that the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament are blessings that are given to the church in the New Testament. Usually in covenant theology, the time of the birth of the church is said to be either with Adam, or with Abraham. They differ among themselves there, which is perfectly alright – theologians usually differ among themselves to some extent. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, insist on a very strong distinction between Israel and the Gentiles, and they insist on the beginning of the church at the Day of Pentecost. That is, the general run of dispensationalists – there are dispensationalists who believe that the church began with the conversion of Paul, and some dispensationalists, usually called ultra-dispensationalists by other dispensationalists, [laughter] believe that the church did not begin really until the end of the period set forth in the Book of Acts, and that we are not even expected to be baptized, and some even, not even expected to be baptized nor to observe the Lord’s supper. There are a lot of different opinions, and we cannot, of course, talk about all the differences between them.

But coming to this text right here, there have been some different opinions about the meaning of these verses. Covenant theologians have generally interpreted these things here to mean that the church, as we know it, is in the Old Testament: “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.” And so generally speaking, they think of the revelation of the church as being something that began in the Old Testament but took on a new flavor, merely, with the coming of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. So they usually

think of the church as being in the Old Testament, and it’s proper to them to speak of Israel as the church.

Some others, holding sort of a mediating position, have held that there is a revelation of some church truth in the Old Testament, but generally speaking, church truth is related to that part of the Bible that has to do with the Day of Pentecost and following, and the company that is redeemed from that period on.

Dispensationalists have held that there is no church truth in the Old Testament, except truth that has to do with the plan of salvation. And that of course is truth that pertains both to Israel, and also pertains to the Gentiles and pertains to the church. Now we do have here a statement made in verse 9, “And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the ages hath been hidden in God who created all things by Jesus Christ.” And then we have in verse 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.” And then over in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 25 and following in a parallel passage, the Apostle says these things:

“Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God; 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.”

It’s clear this is a parallel passage, and the Apostle says in verse 25 that it “is given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints.”

It would seem from a reading of these verses in Ephesians and Colossians, that the Apostle is speaking about something that is new. He calls it a secret. Someone might say, “Well does he not say in verse 5 of Ephesians, “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” – does not that suggest that there is some revelation in Old Testament times? In other words, there was a revelation of some parts of that mystery, but in other ages it was not made known unto the sons of men in the way that, or in the manner that it was revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets now.

Well, if that is the Apostle’s meaning, then we would simply say the Lord Jesus anticipated the coming of the church and the union of the Jew and Gentile into the church. He anticipated in the passages like Matthew chapter 16 verse 18 where he said, “I will build my church.” That’s an anticipation of the doctrine of the church. Furthermore, in the tenth chapter of the Book of John, in those great parables that he tells there, he does speak of other sheep – this is John 10:16 – he speaks of other “sheep I have who are not of this fold, them also I must bring”—he’s talking about Israel—“other sheep I have”—this is the Gentiles; “other sheep I have not of this fold (Israel) them I shall also bring, and they shall hear my voice and there shall be one fold”—now the Greek says not “one fold” but “one flock,” and if you have an American Standard Bible they probably have rendered that “one flock,” “one shepherd.” In other words, the time is coming, the Lord says, when the Jews and Gentiles will be gathered together in a body which may be called by the metaphor of the shepherd and the sheep, “one flock”—the other sheep which are not of this fold. So in that sense, there would be a revelation of part of this mystery in other times, but not as it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets.

I know that some of you may be puzzling and saying, “Wait, doesn’t he say here holy apostles and prophets? Well, if it was revealed to the apostles and prophets, the prophets ministered in the Old Testament times, did they not? Therefore, this says it was revealed to the apostles and the prophets.” Well, did you notice the order of those

words? He says, “apostles and prophets.” He does not say, “prophets and apostles.” Now we learn from the study of the Book of Acts that there were prophets in the New Testament church. Can you think of some? Well, you probably could. If you read the Book of Acts, Agabus is one of the prophets. Silas is said to be a prophet. John calls his Book of Revelation a prophecy. So, the Apostles carried out a work of prophecy. The holy apostles and prophets are New Testament prophets, and New Testament apostles.

Well then, what about that word “as” though, “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”? Well, we don’t have to say that that means necessarily that there is a great revelation of truth in Old Testament times, the revelation of this truth, I mean. Because do we not use an expression like this, “The sun doesn’t shine in the nighttime as it does in the daytime”—wouldn’t that be alright? “The sun doesn’t shine at night, as it does during the day.” Well the fact is that the sun doesn’t shine at night at all. So, the idea that “as” must mean a measure of revelation of this in Old Testament times is not necessarily so.

I’m inclined to think, and this is my own opinion, I’m inclined to think that what the Apostle Paul is saying is that there is now a new relationship between Jew and Gentile that did not attain in Old Testament times. I think we have to face that. “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” – well, what is this new arrangement, what is this mystery that was not revealed in ancient times? Well, did you notice the sixth verse? “That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.” That’s the content of the mystery. That’s the one new man, and the relationship between Jew and Gentile in the one new man. Remember in verse 15, chapter 2, the Apostle had said, “Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; to make in himself of two one new man, so making peace.” And this by the cross.

So what we have today in the church of Jesus Christ is something new. Now, the church is not the mystery, but it’s the relationship of the Jew and Gentile within the church that is the secret. It was not a secret in the Scriptures that the Gentiles would be saved. Now the Apostles had difficulty with this. Do you remember who had difficulty? Well, Peter had difficulty. Remember, when he had the vision, he was looking out, fell asleep, had the vision of the sheep that came down from heaven and those unclean animals within it, and he was told arise and eat; he said, not so Lord, I’ve never eaten anything unclean. All of this was to prepare him for the preaching of the Gospel to Cornelius and the Gentiles. Because they had the idea, carried over from Old Testament times, where it was a proper idea, that the person who was converted through the preaching of the Gospel, in order to be related properly to the true God, he became an Israelite. He became a part of the company of Israel. Think of Ruth, for example. Ruth was a Moabitess, but because of Ruth’s experience and finally her conversion, she became an Israelite. And actually, as you know, became one in the line of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are other illustrations of that in the genealogies in Matthew chapter 1.

So when a person in the Old Testament became a believer, they identified with Israel. They became a member of that company of people. Now Peter had difficulty with that, the idea that Gentiles could be saved. That was just natural, because Israel had the revelation of God, and God had spoken to them, and he had appeared to them, and he had ministered through them, and he had difficulty with that. But finally, God overcame his difficulties, and he came to Cornelius’ house, and he preached the Gospel, and he came to Jerusalem and told them how God has been saving Gentiles.

Now there was still one other thing that they didn’t understand. And that was, not simply that whether or not Gentiles could be saved, but if they were saved, were they in the believing company on the same level with Jewish saved people? Did they have to be circumcised? And of course, that question arose in Antioch. And after a lot of disputing there, Paul and others, like Barnabas, came down to Jerusalem, and there they had some

more disputation and had a lot of arguing with people standing up and citing Scripture, seeking to understand the mind of the Lord, and finally Peter stood up, and he gave what came to be ultimately, the decision of the council, and that was, God saved people by faith through grace, and that the Gentiles not only could be saved, but they were saved in the same way. “But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall be saved, even as they.”

Now Peter turned it around, because anybody who had the slightest idea that there was any advantage so far as salvation was concerned in being a Jew, didn’t understand the grace of God. So he said, you people who wonder how the Gentiles can be saved and whether they can enter the church on the same basis with us, you need to have your theology purified. We’ll send you back to theology 101 if you don’t watch out, when you get to heaven. So we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ not, “they shall be saved even as we,” but “we shall be saved, even as they,” in case there’s somebody with this lurking sense of self-righteousness.

So in history, they had to go through the experience of the Gentiles can be saved, and when they are saved they don’t have to become Jews. They are saved, and they stand on the same plane as the Jews. That, I think, is what he means when he says that the Gentiles in Ephesians 3:6, should be fellow heirs and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the Gospel.

You know, if you look at that in the Greek text it’s a rather interesting construction that the Apostle uses in connection with the three words. I’m going to read it out of the Greek text because the relationship of the Jews and the Gentiles is seen more plainly in the Greek text. The Apostle writes, “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ through the Gospel.” Now in Greek he takes three nouns and he puts the little preposition “with” with them, and coins – doesn’t coin in the sense of making up new words entirely – but rather puts these words together so that you get the overwhelming idea of the sameness of

relationship between Jew and Gentile in the Church of Jesus Christ. So the Gentiles are fellow heirs, they are fellow members of the one body, they are fellow partakers of the promise in Christ by the Gospel. That’s the mystery. That’s the secret. That’s the relationship that did not exist in Old Testament times. That’s the content of the mystery.

Now notice, too, the means by which they come to these blessings is through the Gospel. Just as in the Old Testament times individuals were saved through the Gospel, so in New Testament times they are saved through the Gospel. The Gospel is not different now. The Gospel is the same Gospel that was preached in Old Testament times. It’s not the Gospel that’s changed. The results of the Gospel are different in the sense that in the Old Testament, when Jews were saved, they became a member of the theocratic company. They also were responsible to be put under the Law of Moses, and they also were responsible to submit to the sign of the covenant. But now, in this age, the law done away with, they are fellow members, fellow partakers of the promise. Paul in Romans says, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ called to be an apostle, separated unto the Gospel of God which he had promised before by his prophets and the holy Scriptures.” So in the Old Testament we have the Gospel. In the New Testament we have the Gospel. In this age we have the secret. That was not made known in ancient times as it is revealed through Paul and the apostles and prophets of New Testament times.

And that’s a magnificent relationship we have it is not? Gentiles and Jews now brought together in one redeeming company, fellow heirs, fellow members of the body, this one new man, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ by the Gospel.

We are, Sunday morning, studying Paul’s letter to the Romans, and in Romans chapter 11 he goes into more detail concerning the fact that the natural branches were cut off, broken off, and the unnatural branches of the Gentiles were grafted in among them, that is, the faithful ones, the remnant, and have become fellow partakers of the root of the fatness of the olive tree. In other words, the Gentiles have been brought in to this one body and they have been made partakers of the blessings which are called the promise in

Christ by the Gospel. What we have now in the church of Jesus Christ, then, is a group of redeemed people who are made up of Jews and Gentiles who stand on the same plane before the Lord God.

It is a new international community, too. Jews and Gentiles, all equal in Christ. They are not joined to the Jewish nation and subordinated to them in significance, but there is one new, or to use the adjective “new” in its stress, one fresh man, for that’s the idea of the Greek word *kinos* which is used there instead of the word *neyos*. One fresh man. Isn’t that a magnificent thing, that we Gentiles are now members of the church of Jesus Christ, fellow partakers of the promise in Christ by the Gospel? We’re called Children of Abraham, seed of Abraham, because we possess those promises. Something remarkable and new in the unfolding of God’s program.

The Apostle goes on, “Of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.” Here he speaks of the mystery of that ministry. The divine power is measured out unto Paul, and the gift of grace has been given him to evangelize the untraced riches of Christ and to illuminate this arrangement.

He says, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints.” By the way, Paul’s Latin name, “Paul,” means “little.” And what he has done here is to take the word least in the Greek text and make it a comparative. Now least is a superlative. But he has said, “I who am leaster”; that’s what he’s done in Greek. So he’s taken a superlative and made it a comparative. It’s as if he’s to say, “I’m not simply the littlest, but the littlester of all the saints.” He really feels that way because he persecuted the church of God. “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” That Greek adjective is one that means “untrackable.” Theodorate, one of the earlier church fathers, said, “And why are you preached if the riches are unsearchable? For this very thing,” he says, “I preach because they are unsearchable.” So he preaches the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Now then, in the final few verses, the Apostle speaks of the motivation of this ministry of the mystery. “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known through the church the manifold wisdom of God.” Now this is the purpose Paul sees in this new arrangement in the church of Christ. The purpose is that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places—what are the principalities and powers in heavenly places?

Do you know that there are some very good modern commentators, still living, who have tried to make Paul mean “by principalities and powers” the political, economic structures of society. So he is supposed to be saying that this mystery has been given to him that he might make men see the manifold wisdom of God, so that society, in its political-economic structure, might be redeemed by Jesus Christ. G.B. Kaird, in some ways a very good interpreter, has taken that particular viewpoint there. That is remarkable. It’s the characteristic of much of our New Testament and Old Testament scholarship today to try to find in the Bible things that our society is torn up over. What is meant by “principalities and powers?”

If one studies the Apostle’s use of that terminology, you can only come to the conclusion that he is referring to the heavenly hosts, the angelic beings, the principalities and powers. They are heavenly beings, heavenly spiritual beings. Well now if that’s what Paul means, then he is saying that this great work of building up this one new man of Jew and Greek, so that they’re equal in one body of Christ, has as one of its major purposes the manifestation, or the, as he says, the making known of the manifold wisdom of God to the angelic hosts about us. In other words, we are the means by which God is instructing the angels in his wisdom. Now isn’t that something to think about?

The Apostle not only says that here but also over in 1 Corinthians 4 verse 9. He makes a statement that is somewhat similar to this. He says, 1 Corinthians 4:9, “For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men.” So the Apostle’s figure is

we have a theater. What’s the theater? Well the theater is human history. That’s God’s theater. What’s the stage? Well the stage is the world. Who are the actors? Well the actors are the members of the body of Christ. Who’s the author of the play, the director of the play, and the producer of the play? Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are the authors of the play, the directors of the play, the producers of the play. And who is the audience? Well from Ephesians the audience is the angelic host. And what are they learning? The manifold wisdom of God.

There are great things of course that the angelic world will perhaps ultimately see. Some things they may never be able to completely understand. I think it’s probably true in the light of Paul’s statement to broaden it out a little bit and say we are learning some things, too. But what we have is this great production by the Lord God in order that the angelic hosts might come to understand his manifold wisdom. And it’s through the church. We are the instrumentality. Think of the fall in the Garden of Eden. Think of the work of redemption by the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says angels desire to look into that redemption.

The national program of the gathering together of Jews and Gentiles into this one body, into this great new international community, and all of the things that he is going to do, now and in the future, is designed to be instructive for the angels. That has some relationship to that state over in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 when Paul is talking about head coverings, and he says that women, under certain circumstances, ought to wear head coverings on account of the angels. Why? Well, the angels are interested in things that are happening in the church of Jesus Christ. What are they learning through you, if anything? Of course, they can learn things negative as well as positive. But isn’t that a magnificent plan to the intent that now “unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known through the church the manifold wisdom of God according to the purpose of the ages which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord”?

Some years ago I was carrying on a ministry over the radio with Dr. W.E. Hawkins, and at that point I was expounding for one of the first times Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. And, not over the radio, but elsewhere, and we began to talk about inspiration. And it was before or after one of the messages that I had given on the Psalms over the radio, and he said to me, “I have a proof for inspiration which you cannot understand.” Well I was immediately interested, because I fancied myself something of a theologian even then. [Laughter] And he said, “I’ve preached Christ for over 35 years”—and I had preached him for about five—“I’ve preached Christ for over 35 years from this book, and I realized I’ve just skimmed the surface of it.” He said, “Who could talk about Abraham Lincoln or George Washington for that long and still be at it?” And that was his proof: “I’ve been preaching for 35 years, and I’m still at it. And furthermore, there’s still much there that I have yet to plumb the depths of. That’s a proof of inspiration you don’t understand.”

Well he was right. I didn’t have that experience. I could only guess that probably at the end of 35 years I might still be preaching the Gospel of the grace of God, and now I understand what he was talking about. And if I could see him I would say, “I understand now.” But he’s in heaven, and he understands still more which I don’t understand yet. [Laughter] This is the purpose of the ages.

Well, let me conclude with Paul’s comments in verses 12 and 13. He says, “In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.” That little expression “by the faith of him” shows us the means by which we come into the glorious position whereby we who are Gentiles stand on this same basis in the body of Christ as the Jews, through the faith of him. “Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.”

You know, in the light of this, it’s very difficult to see how an individual should not be extremely concerned for the church of Jesus Christ. Now we must define the term “church” of course. I know that some men read Ephesians chapter 3 and say, “You see,

the church looms large in the thoughts of God,” and it does. And then they try to make application like, you must join a particular church, and you must be a member of an institutional church, and you must become a part of this group, usually it’s associated with a particular group, a particular denomination, and if you’re not, you’re being disobedient. But we must define the term, “church.”

I have received two letters recently from a man in Canada. He may listen to this tape but, nevertheless, truth is truth. And his letter began something like this. He said, “I need an answer to a question”—he wrote three pages, had a lot of other questions, but this was the one he was really concerned about—he said, “Does a person have to be a member of an institutional church and a member of our church in order to be sure of the grace of God to him in salvation?” He went on and said a lot of other things. He evidently is a member or is attending a Methodist church at the present time. I gather that because he made a comment concerning John Wesley, and that he didn’t think he had to agree with John Wesley in everything. [Laughter].

And I just got another letter from him today. He wrote the other one just a week or two ago. I had just last night written him out a letter in answer to his question and also a few other points in the letter. I went on to say to him well, we must first define the term church. What is the term church? What does it mean?

Well, according to the New Testament, the church is a term that refers, first of all, to the believers, the body of believers, who’ve been, by the baptism of the Spirit through faith, brought to this relationship to all other believers. It’s an organism, a body, a universal body. That’s the church.

And then of course there is the local church, the group of believers who meet at a particular place regularly and there observe the ordinances, listen to the word of God, practice baptism, observe the Lord’s supper, listen to the word of God under the oversight of elders and their helpers, the deacons.

Now when we say that the Apostle laid great stress upon the church, we must be careful to point out that when he said the church is this important and is at the center of the purpose of God, we’re talking about the universal church and its local manifestation. We’re not talking about a denomination. We’re not talking about an institutional body. But we’re talking about the true believers. Now these true believers are the object of the concern of the triune God in this age: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we cannot really be in harmony with the Lord if we’re not concerned about the body of believers. All the body of believers that make up the church, and not simply in Believers’ Chapel, but the whole body of believers, it is the concern of the triune God. It is his purpose to accomplish this task of building this one new man and brining this one new man to maturity.

Let me sum it up by saying, the church is the body of believers, Jews and Gentiles, they themselves are fellow partakers of the promise, fellow members of the body, fellow heirs of the great promises. They stand on the same basis, Jew and Gentile. They are the concern of our triune God, and through the church, God is accomplishing, as one of his great tasks, the display of his manifold wisdom: his wisdom in creation, his wisdom in providence, his wisdom in redemption, his wisdom in his total plan, which will ultimately lead up to a kingdom and finally the new heavens and a new earth.

As believers, it is important that we find our place in that body, perform our tasks, and under God, by his grace, fulfill his purpose for us. Let’s close in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are thankful to Thee for this magnificent unfolding of the purpose of the ages, and particularly of the secret, something that was not known in Old Testament times that Gentiles and Jews would form one body, one divine company, fellow partakers of the divine promises.

And O God, we do pray that the church may be the concern of all of us who are members of that body. Enable us to have the same thought about the church that Thou dost have.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.