

## **Dispensational truth and the Epistles of the Mystery**

The reader who has read Dispensational truth and the Fundamentals will remember that the importance of the four prison epistles came into prominence, and we expressed our intention to deal with the reason why these epistles are so valuable to us at this present time. We suppose the following questions arise in the reader's mind:

(1) WHY PRISON EPISTLES?

(2) WHY FOUR PRISON EPISTLES?

(3) WHAT ARE THESE PRISON EPISTLES?

(4) WHAT IS THEIR DISTINCTIVE TEACHING?

To answer the first question, Why prison Epistles? we shall have to turn our attention to the Acts of the Apostles, in order to observe a few important items which are there made known concerning the ministry of the apostle Paul. After many years of service the apostle, in Acts 20, made it clear that he had come to the end of one ministry and was facing another. He told his hearers (in verses 17-38) that they would see his face no more, and that his future ministry would be associated with bonds and afflictions.

Later, when standing before Agrippa, the apostle revealed that when the Lord met him on the road to Damascus, He not only gave him a commission at the time, but promised that He would appear unto him a second time and give him a further commission (Acts 26:16-18). Upon his arrival as a prisoner at Rome, the apostle sent for the leaders of the Jews, and after an all-day Conference with them, dismissed them by quoting for the last time Isaiah 6:9,10, and by saying:

“The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and they will hear it” (Acts 28:28).

We are not left to conjecture what the apostle taught consequent upon this dispensational crisis; we have written testimony. This prison ministry becomes eloquent to us in the epistles which Paul wrote as the prisoner of the Lord. These we must now discover:

**EPHESIANS IS CLEARLY A PRISON EPISTLE.**

“I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles” (Eph. 3:1).

**PHILIPPIANS IS A PRISON EPISTLE.**

“My bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace” (Phil. 1:13).

**COLOSSIANS IS A PRISON EPISTLE.**

“The mystery of Christ, for which I am also in bonds” (Col. 4:3).

**2 TIMOTHY IS A PRISON EPISTLE.**

“Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner” (2 Tim. 1:8).

**PHILEMON IS A PRISON EPISTLE.**

“Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ” (Philemon 9).

While Philemon is a precious little epistle, it is not written with any intention of manifesting the distinctive truth of the mystery, and consequently we usually speak of “the four prison epistles”, which should cause no misunderstanding to any believer.

We now devote the remainder of our space to setting forth the distinctive teaching of these four epistles. First of all it is interesting to perceive that they are in two pairs. One pair teaches basic truths, the other pair exhorts the believer to faithful continuance. This can be visualised if we set them out as follows:

EPHESIANS. - The revelation of the Mystery.

PHILIPPIANS. - The running for the Prize.

COLOSSIANS. - The revelation of the Mystery.

2 TIMOTHY. - The fight and the Crown.

Before we come to the question “What is the Mystery?” let us look at one or two distinctive items of these epistles.

“HEAVENLY PLACES” (Eph. 1:3). - The sphere of blessing for this church is not in the earth, nor in the heavenly Jerusalem, but in the “heavenly places”. These are at the right hand of God, far above all principality and power, far above all heavens (Eph. 1:3,20,21; 4:10). This church is said to be seated together in these very heavens (Eph. 2:6). No higher sphere of blessing can be conceived or is revealed in Scripture. There is nothing like it in any epistle written by Paul prior to his imprisonment during the Acts, or by any other apostle at any time.

“BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD” (Eph. 1:4). - Strictly speaking, the word here translated “foundation” should be translated “overthrow”, as it refers to Genesis 1:2, but we cannot deal with that question here. It will suffice for our purpose if we realise that this is the only place in the Word of God where any company of believers is associated with a period before the foundation of the world, all other companies being connected with a period from or since the foundation of the world (see Matt. 25:34). Here then are two peculiar features found nowhere else in the Scriptures:

(1) A SPHERE OF BLESSING “IN HEAVENLY PLACES FAR ABOVE ALL”.

(2) A PERIOD OF CHOICE “BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD”.

Now Paul, as the prisoner of Jesus Christ, claimed that to him had been given a “dispensation”, and that to him had been revealed “The mystery”. We must be clear as to the meaning of the words before we can go further.

The word “dispensation” is translated “stewardship” in Luke 16:2, and has no connection with the word “age” or a period of time. A steward was once spelt in Old English, Sty-ward, the Ward of the Farm. Paul therefore claimed to have been appointed by God over some special section of His great Vineyard.

The word “mystery” means “a secret”, and especially a secret purpose which is not divulged because of an enemy. God had planned the ages, but because of the great enemy of truth He purposely did not reveal every part of that plan at one time. The bulk of the Scriptures deal with that phase of God’s purpose which is connected with Israel. When Israel failed to repent, it certainly did look as though the evil one had brought the purpose of the ages to a standstill. Here, then, was manifested the wisdom of God. When all seemed lost He revealed His secret, that during the period of Israel’s rejection, He had determined to call, from among the Gentiles, a company who should be members of the Body of Christ, who though aliens from the commonwealth of Israel should be blessed far above Israel’s inheritance, and beyond all that the promise of Abraham could give.

This “secret” God revealed to Paul the prisoner, and through him everyone else has learned its wondrous message. This leaves all other callings and dispensations where Scripture leaves them, and does not confuse *kingdom* with *church*, *bride* with *body*, *earth* with *heaven*.

Whilst there is much more to write, we must come straightaway to Ephesians 3, in order that we shall have, in the very language of Scripture, Paul’s own statement about this new dispensation:

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ FOR YOU GENTILES, If ye have heard of the DISPENSATION of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by REVELATION He made known unto me THE MYSTERY ... 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; and to make all men see what is the fellowship (Revised Version dispensation) of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God” (Eph. 3:1-3,8,9).

As a confirmation of this claim and a further explanation of its meaning, let us quote from Colossians:

“For His BODY’S sake, which is the church: 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; 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 ...” (Col. 1:24-27).

Whoever the reader may be, and whatever views he may hold as to dispensational truth, here are two inspired statements in the Word of God that cannot be ignored. They challenge attention, faith and adherence. If followed, they lead to an assurance and to a fellowship which transcends anything else found in Scripture. Is it any wonder that, having caught a glimpse of the glory that is there at the right hand of God, we should set so high a value on these four prison epistles?

The fact that in these four epistles we find the revelation of the mystery does not, and cannot, mean that other Scriptures are ignored, or that fundamentals are denied. This aspect of the subject is dealt with in No. 8 of this series. We wish we could write more fully of these precious things, but our object will have been achieved if prejudice has been removed, and the claims of these epistles upon the believer’s closest attention have been vindicated.