

Part Seven of Dispensations.

I want to jump ahead a little here, so that you can see where we are going, and then we'll go back and do a bit more filling in. To that end we'll pick up at Eph: 3 v1. Here Paul refers to himself as 'the prisoner of the Christ, Jesus, **in behalf of you nations**, - if so *that* ye have heard of the **dispensation** of the **grace of God** given me toward you;' and this refers to the '**mystery of the Christ**'. He further explains that this had not been revealed to men before.

We'll be reading quite a lot of scripture this time, for there is a pattern that appears from a series of what appear to be separate events, but which are, as we shall see, steps in a very definite pattern. It becomes obvious, after a while, that the whole of Acts is a carefully organised and equally carefully controlled program. God has a purpose and nothing at all is able to interrupt it.

We need to note one or two things that he, Paul, says here so as to get some idea of the time angle involved. First of all the book of Ephesians is doctrinal, whereas the Book of Acts is more of a history. When therefore we read in Ephesians that Paul is 'the prisoner of the Christ ---- **in behalf of you nations**,' we have to see that time has moved on since we read in Acts that at first the scattered disciples preached '**to none save only to Jews**' – Acts 11v19 - and then Paul in Rom 1v16 states it to be '**to Jew first and also to Greek**'. Yet, here in Eph: 3v1 Paul is now locked up – a prisoner - to be toward **the nations**. Then, in v3, he says that he was given **the revelation of the mystery**, which had **been hidden** prior to that time. In v2, he speaks of being given the '**dispensation**' or '**stewardship**' of **the GRACE of God**. When we put those facts together the conclusion has to be that a new way of running God's People had been brought in. **The 'household' of God was under new management, and Paul had been charged with the task of setting it in order** – at least from the point of view of the Gentiles who were to be equal in standing with the Jews in it, for the Greek words for 'heirs', 'body' and 'partakers' – 6 - all have the pre-fix 'sun', which would usually come across into English as the prefix 'syn'.

As we shall see, this was not a freshening up of the Law, in fact, God had begun to 'drop hints' to the Apostles as early as Acts 10. Here we have the intervention of God into the Jewish-trained mind. Briefly, there is a generous and God-fearing Centurion by the name of Cornelius, who dwelt at Caesarea. He gets a vision of an angel turning up, which just about scares him stiff. This angel tells him that his prayers and giving had come up before God 'for a memorial.' He is to send for Simon Peter, who is in Joppa. God knows exactly where he is and who his host is and also where the house is situated. So, Cornelius does exactly as instructed. The next day, when the three messengers were nearing the city, Peter went up onto the flat roof to pray. He became hungry and asked them to prepare food for him. (Even this hunger is conveniently 'on time'.) However, whilst they prepared food for him, he fell into a trance. The visitation he received opened up his thinking, taking it into an area that his Jewish upbringing would never have allowed. He was instructed to eat unclean animals and birds, which he stoutly refused to do. He protested to God that he'd never ever done such a thing. But the Lord reproved him, saying that whatever God had cleansed, was clean. (A point we may well need to grasp at times, concerning our own standing before God!) This vision was confirmed all the way to the limit required by the law, in that it happened three times. Whilst Peter is 'perplexed' by this vision, wondering what it was all about, the guys sent by Cornelius knock on the door and ask for Simon Peter, and the Spirit talks to Peter and tells him it's OK and to go with them. This cleared his mind enough to enable him to accompany these gentiles. We know the rest of the story, of how God short-circuited Peter's normal routine and baptised the Gentiles with His

Holy Spirit, just as it had happened to the Jews on the day of Pentecost. This is, of course, a very wonderful thing. But, that isn't the end of the story for it was the preparation for the coming into the fold of many gentile converts. Would it not have been better to give this example to Paul? Not at all. Paul was in no position at that time to make decisions for the Church. In fact he and Barnabas would profit in their work later, as a result of this experience in the life of Peter, when they came to the leaders of the church at Jerusalem, as we shall now see. The point we need to grasp is that Paul was working, at that time, under the oversight of the Jerusalem leadership, to whom they turned for a decision on the question of whether a gentile had to be circumcised in order to be saved, which incident we find in Acts 15, to which we now refer.

In chapter 15, we find an account of some Jews who were telling the converts from among the gentiles that they couldn't be saved unless they were circumcised. That led to a verbal confrontation, with Paul and Barnabas, which in turn brought about the decision that the question should be taken to the Jerusalem church for a decision. From 15v6 of Acts, we see that gathering in progress. There were lots of questions being asked, after which Peter stood up and recounted what had happened at the house of Cornelius. The fact that the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the Gentiles as He had upon the crowd gathered on the day of Pentecost, settled the question re circumcision being required by gentiles. I quote from v7: And when there had been much questioning, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and Brethren, YE know that a good while ago God made choice among you, that by my mouth the nations should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, Who knoweth the heart, bare witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, **cleansing their hearts by faith.** Now therefore why make ye trial of God, by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor WE were able to bear? But we believe we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in like manner as they.' Read now from v12, and you will see that this is not the 'mystery' that was to be revealed to Paul, for it had been prophesied – v15 – and covered the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David. Whilst the Jews didn't seem to see that the Law had been fulfilled by Christ, and as a result stayed with the legal system, the converts were allowed to be free of it. Yet, we mustn't miss the fact stated by Peter in v9, i.e. 'cleansing their hearts by FAITH'.

So, at this stage, Paul is clearly working under the Headship of the New Church, who, in turn, are expanding their own thinking in order to stay in line with where the Holy Spirit is going.

Later in this chapter – see v36 – Paul and Barnabas split over the matter of Mark, so Paul chose Silas as his new companion and they went off, committed by the brethren to 'the GRACE of the Lord'. However, we must not forget that when Ananias was in no mind to go to Saul, the Lord explained to him that Saul was a chosen vessel unto Him with **a mission to the gentiles** – Acts 9v15, and this became, more and more, the burden of his heart. In Acts 13v46 we see the matter bubble up with the following words: 'But since ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, **lo, we turn to the nations**'. Yet in 14v1. at Iconium, they go into the synagogue. Again, in Acts 18v6, he does the same thing, only, later, - see v10 – he's back reasoning with the Jews. At this point we need to take on board another part of the process, which we find recorded in Acts 21. Against all the indications, including the prophecy of Agabus, Paul heads back to Jerusalem. They inform him that there were thousands of converts amongst the Jews there at Jerusalem, but 'that all are zealots of the law' – v20. The problem is that they've heard that Paul is teaching the Jews who live amongst the nations not to keep the law, not to keep its customs and not to circumcise their children. Their advice is that he joins with the four brethren who have taken a vow and this will convince the people that he is

keeping the law. He takes their advice, but it doesn't work. The Lord has other plans that will bring into being something that He had arranged even before Paul was born, and bring to pass the first of two stages of the official cutting off of the GRACE that God had given to the nation in the 'even now' promise of 'seasons of refreshing' if they would repent. (Remember that the 12's ministry was strictly to the Jews, which ministry had room for proselytes, but with strictly limited conditions.)

It all happens like this. When Paul's session in the temple – as per the advice of the elders of the church – was almost completed, the Jews from Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up the Jews and caused a riot, all centred on Paul. The Jewish authority immediately closed the temple doors – probably to cleanse the temple, which would have been considered defiled – and the crowd went about trying to kill Paul. News gets to the Roman commander of the soldiers, who dashes out to sort things. They manage to rescue Paul, bind him with two chains, but as he is about to be taken into the castle, he gets permission of the Colonel to speak to the crowd of Jews. He speaks to them in Hebrew and this quietyens them. From 22v3, we have his argument. In it Paul gives an account of his conversion, though I question whether 'conscriptio' wouldn't be a better word!

Anyway, speaking to them in their Hebrew language, he recounts his experience, which sets him out as a very well-born Jew, with a really first class education at the 'feet of Gamaliel. He was, in fact, a zealot for God. He tells how he persecuted 'this Way, unto death, and calls upon the High Priest and Elders as his witnesses. He then tells of the trip to Damascus and recounts his conversion in which we find he had very little say in. He had been chosen of God and was, as we would say during wartime, 'being called up for service.' The light convinces him this is the Lord, and accordingly, he calls Him that. When he hears Who it is, his next comment is, v10- 'What shall I do Lord'. Now, I'd like you to pay attention to the next statement, which is the Lord's reply to his question. "Arise, go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all *things* WHICH ARE APPOINTED FOR THEE TO DO." That ended his intended mission to persecute the church at Damascus, and set him up in his service in the Lord. I'll read Ananias' instructions to you now – you'll find them in Acts 22v14 – 21. I want to stress two of the vv's, namely v18 and v21.

Everything went well up to that point and then the uproar started again and the soldiers were ordered to get Paul/Saul into the castle. The Colonel also ordered that he be scourged, so that he could get to the bottom of the situation. It's at this point that we see something come into play that God had arranged, even before Paul was born. Once they had him tied up, ready for his whipping, he turns to the centurion who was in charge of this bit of the procedure and asked him if what he was about to do was legal, in view of the fact that he, Paul, was a Roman citizen and so far, stood uncondemned. Let me read the next bit – v26 to 29. Paul shouldn't even have been bound, so powerful were Paul's rights as a Roman citizen. 'Rights' that were his **by birth**. Anyway the Jews weren't finished yet, for over forty of them put themselves under an oath that they would fast until they had killed Paul. To this end they got the Sanhedrin to call another meeting with Paul so that they should have the opportunity to kill him. Now, **it just happened that Paul's nephew heard them**, so he reported it to the Colonel, who got Paul out of the way that night. Just how serious that Colonel was being affected by all this, can be seen in the fact that he sent four hundred and seventy two men to get Paul safely out of the way, and sent them off in the middle of the night. WHY? Not because of all the uproar that was going on, though that was all he saw, but because the Lord had decreed that Paul should also witness to the Jewish leaders at Rome.

The intrigue goes on and on for a long time – over two years – and eventually, Festus asks Paul if he will go to Jerusalem to be judged of these matters, and it is here, that once again, Paul falls back upon his innate rights as a Roman citizen, and ‘appeals to Caesar’ – Acts 25v11. This means that no one can judge him but Caesar, and there the Will of God - see Acts 23v11 – was set in motion.

The journey to Rome begins, and though not a smooth one, eventually they come to Rome, where, Acts 28v16 tells us that Paul was suffered to abide by himself with the soldier that guarded him. After three days he called together the ‘first among the Jews’ who agreed to meet with him, which they did. Read from Acts 28v23. Once again we see that the message they reject is that of the Kingdom of God, which Paul drew on from the prophets and Moses, and persuading them concerning Jesus, and he did that for the whole day. (Once again, no ‘Mystery’ here!) They were divided and Paul then dismissed them. But he quoted a passage from the O.T – see v25--=. NB v28. He dwelt for two whole years in that house – his prison – and it is from there, it is believed, that the so-called ‘prison epistles’ were written. Their message is different, bringing another aspect of God’s work in man.

What is revealed in this later revelation, we shall, D.V, look at further on. History quickly loses sight of the Twelve and there is a gap in secular history for a number of years. What is sure is that King Jesus has not yet been enthroned in the nation of Israel, so what is God doing amongst men? Hopefully we are now ready to look, bearing in mind that what we have looked at so far is by no means an exhaustive treatment of the subject.