

Series on the Book of Ephesians
Ephesians 1:8-10
Sermon #6
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THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S WILL IN SALVATION L. Dwight Custis

Take your Bibles and turn to Ephesians chapter 1.

I have been asking our men in the reading, I will not always do this, to read related passages of Scripture; but every once in a while we will come back and read a section of Ephesians, too. I hope that you are reading through the epistle and reading it as frequently as you can.

Those of you who were here last Sunday morning will remember that I pointed out to you that Paul discusses the wonderful subject of salvation by way of praise here in verses 3 through 14. He emphasized that there are certain past aspects to the truth of salvation and certain present aspects, as well as future. With respect to the past, we saw in verse 4 that we are chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. In verses 5 and 6 we are predestined to be sons in the family of God. That was all taken care of before time began. With respect to the present, there are many things that he could have said, but he emphasized particularly that we have redemption through His blood which means also the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace, as he stated there in verse 7. Then, from verses 8 through 12 we are concerned with the future. We see what lies ahead. Again, when he talks about the past he only gives us a partial picture; when he talks about the present he only says a little of what he could say; and when he talks about the future the same is true. He does not speak exhaustively in any case.

I am going to deal with one of these future aspects this morning. That is the reason I wanted to review that just briefly with you so that you would see the relationship that it has with what we have already covered.

Just to complete it, you can see in verses 13 and 14 that, having gone through this brief survey of salvation (if we want to call it that), then he explains in verses 13 and 14 why we can be sure that we will ultimately enter into our inheritance and that nothing can possibly happen that would cause us to lose this wonderful salvation that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Christ. That is absolute safety, is it not? Complete security in Christ.

All that we have in salvation is ours. Paul made that clear in verse 3 when he said, "He has blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." You and I actually possess what lies in the future just as much as we do what we are experiencing in the present and what has been the foundation of all of this even in eternity past. We are not talking about something that the Lord is going to add on later as though it is not a present possession with us, but we are speaking about the enjoyment of this. Paul has been very strong throughout this passage in speaking of the fact that what we have in salvation is according to the will of God and according to the purpose of God. Really, that amounts to essentially the same thing. If it is God's will, it is God's purpose; if it is His purpose, then it is His will. He uses both of these expressions.

Look, for example, at the end of verse 5 when he says at the beginning that we are predestinated for sonship by Jesus Christ. He says that is "according to the good pleasure of his will." In verse 9 you have essentially the same thing, "according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself (at the end of verse 9). Then, in verse 11, "In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." We see that this is the outworking of what God has determined to be done. God, as Paul

tells us, has ordained this work of salvation. It is the work of His sovereign, omnipotent power, an eternal God Who cannot fail and will not fail to accomplish all that He has determined to do. There is real assurance for us in seeing this with respect to our salvation.

This morning I want to deal specifically with verse 8, 9, and 10. Let me read these verses for you. I have mentioned before that the thought is really one thought from the beginning of verse 3 to the end of verse 14. You have a period, in the King James, at the end of verse 6 and you have another period at the end of verse 12, but really it is one complete thought as he is dealing with this subject of salvation. When he comes down to verse 8 and he is moving from what we could call the present tense of salvation into the future aspect he says: "Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him."

We are concerned about the dispensation of the fulness of times. Remember that, although this is yet future, what he has to say about the future is just as certain to take place as anything that has already taken place as far as our salvation is concerned. What we are concerned about this morning is really prophecy, prophecy with regard to salvation. I would not be able to teach what I am going to teach this morning if it had not been revealed to the Apostle Paul, and Paul certainly would not have been able to write this if it had not been divinely revealed to him. We are dealing, in a very real sense, with the doctrine of revelation. We know that the Bible itself is a revelation from God. It contains truths that we would have no access to unless God had been pleased to reveal it. No amount of research on man's part could possibly have come up with these great truths as far as salvation is concerned. We would not know what to expect as far as the future goes unless God had seen fit to reveal it to us in His Word.

Remember when Paul was writing to the Corinthian church. He said, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him" (1 Cor. 2:9). That is, just by the ability of what we see or what we hear or what we are capable of understanding, we could not begin to come up with what God has prepared for us in the way of salvation. Then he goes on to say this, and you should never read 1 Corinthians 2:9 without reading 1 Corinthians 2:10, "But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." When we are talking about the future of salvation, we are not talking just about Paul's idea. We are talking about what God revealed to Paul and what Paul was directed to write by the Holy Spirit concerning what the ultimate outcome of our salvation is going to be. Really, it is to be found in those words "that he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him."

In looking at these three verses, 8, 9, and 10, I want you to note, first of all, that in verse 8 he speaks of a twofold gift. This twofold gift is described here as "all wisdom and prudence." We could perhaps change the reading of that a little bit without actually changing what is here: "He has made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence." Paul is not talking here about the wisdom and prudence of God; though when we talk about salvation, salvation is certainly a manifestation of God's wisdom. He is talking here about wisdom and prudence that have been given to us. The word Paul uses in the original for "prudence" is never used of God. It is always used of men. But God has bestowed wisdom and prudence upon us. This is a special gift which we have as a result of the riches of God's grace. You see, we have to dip back a little bit into verse 7 and see the connection there because when he speaks of the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace, he says, "Wherein he hath made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence."

Now, what do these mean and what is this gift that has been bestowed upon us? Wisdom, as Paul uses it here and it is used many, many times in Scripture, is the ability to understand the Word of God. It is ability to understand the truth of God. We, as believers, have that ability. Contrast this, going back to 1 Corinthians 2 from which I quoted just a moment ago, to 1 Corinthians 2:14 and you

will remember what our ability was and what our attitude was before we came to know Jesus Christ as our Saviour. We were not interested in the Bible. We were like many people today who say, "I do not read the Bible because it does not make any sense to me." They do not enjoy it. But when a person comes to know Jesus Christ as his Saviour there is a change. The statement that Paul makes there in 1 Corinthians 2:14 is, "The natural man (the unregenerate man, the person who does not know Jesus Christ) receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." In other words, the unregenerate person, a person who does not know God, a person who has not received Jesus Christ as his Saviour, does not have the capacity to understand the Word of God. Therefore, when we are redeemed and forgiven by the grace of God, it is through this grace that God bestows upon us all wisdom and prudence. That does not mean that I immediately come to understand everything about the Word of God that I need to know and hopefully will eventually know, but that word "all wisdom" means that by the grace of God, as a child of God, I have the God-given capacity to understand the Scriptures so that this book which I once would not read and did not enjoy and could not understand now becomes the delight of my heart.

When Jeremiah says, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart" (Jer. 15:16), he is not talking as an unregenerate man. He is talking as a man who knows God. God has bestowed this upon us. This helps us as far as understanding the truth of Scripture is concerned.

Prudence goes with wisdom. Prudence is, as Archbishop Trenchard has expressed, is the right use and application of the truth. It is one thing for us to understand the truth, but it is another thing for us to know how to live according to the truth. This is the gift which we have received from God. God has given it to us in an abundant measure. He has made to abound unto us in all of this wisdom and prudence. Of course, we know, though Paul does not go into this in this particular passage, that this capacity, spiritual capacity to understand and apply the truth of the Word of God is really ministered to us day by day by the Holy Spirit. He ministers to us, teaching us what the Word means and showing us how the Word is to be applied. When it is given to us in this abundant fashion it means that we have more than enough. I call your attention, as we think about this, to those words "toward us." He has abounded "toward us in all wisdom and prudence" meaning that he is talking about those who are chosen. He is talking about those who have become the sons of God. He is talking about those who have been redeemed and those who have been forgiven. These are the ones who have received all wisdom and prudence as a token of the grace of God. As I say, this puts us in the position where we by God's grace are now capable of understanding the truth of the Word of God. You would have the same attitude toward the Bible if God had not done this for you. The reason that you are here this morning, if you came to hear the Word of God, is because the Lord has done this for you and you want to know more about this book and you look upon it as your meat and drink. We need to be as newborn babes desiring the sincere milk of the word that we might grow thereby.

The second thing that I want you to see in this passage is that he speaks about the mystery of his will. He has "abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed (it probably should read) in him." God has purposed this all in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word "mystery" is a very, very important New Testament word. It occurs, if my count is correct, some 28 times in the New Testament. You will find it the first time in the Gospel of Matthew and you will find it the last time in the Book of The Revelation of Jesus Christ. It does not appear in all 27 books of the New Testament. Five times it is used here in this Epistle to the Ephesians. Let me point those out for you, if I may. You will notice it in chapter 3 verse 3 when he says, "How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, hereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)." Then, in verse 9 of that same chapter he says that it was God's purpose "to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery." Then, in chapter 5 verse 32 you will see that he says, "This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning

Christ and the church." Then, in chapter 6 verse 19 when he is requesting prayer for himself he says, "And for me, that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel." You can see that you cannot really understand the Book of Ephesians unless you understand the word "mystery". Mystery, to us, means something that either we cannot understand-- you know, we will say about a certain subject, "You know, that is just a mystery to me. I cannot figure that out." There are lines of truth that are that way with all of us. I felt that way about chemistry when I was in college. It was just a mystery and for me it never did get solved. We talk about things along that line, or things that we have difficulty in understanding. There are times when we struggle with the truth. We all do that. We learn the truth by degrees. But when you understand this word "mystery" you will see that no part of the Word of God is really off limits to us. If He has given us all wisdom and prudence then this indicates that you and I ought to be reading all of the Bible and we ought to expect that in the passages that seem to be the most difficult to us we can expect the same enlightenment and the same help from the Spirit of God as in the passages that are the best known and the best loved as far as we are concerned.

When you think of a mystery in the Bible, do not think of something mysterious, think of the word "secret." Think of something that God had not revealed before. Actually, Paul defines it for us in a couple of these passages. If you will look again at the third chapter and verses 3 and 4 where he talks about the mystery, then if you go on to read in verse 5 you will see, "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." A mystery is something that God did not make known in Old Testament times. It awaited the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; but it has now been revealed. You will see the same thing in verses 9 and 10 when he says, "To make all men see what is the fellowship (or the stewardship) of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God."

Anybody who is familiar with the Bible at all knows that God did not reveal everything all at once. We can say that the Bible is a progressive revelation. God laid foundations and then He built upon those foundations. God introduced truths and gradually added to our understanding of those truths. Regardless of what the doctrine may be we can go back into the Old Testament and can find the foundations, then we travel through Scripture and come better and better acquainted with those truths. This is what Paul had in mind when he said to Timothy, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The word actually means cutting in strips the Word of truth, being able to go back to see the foundation of salvation and tracing it through the Bible. You can go back to the Garden of Eden and find the foundations of salvation, but it was not all revealed there. It was not all revealed to Abraham. It was not all revealed to Moses. It was not all revealed to David. It was not all revealed to the prophets. As you go through you get more and more information. But if you take all of the Old Testament while it is still the same salvation, God did not say everything in the Old Testament that He had to say about our salvation. Part of it had to wait, as I have said, until Jesus Christ came. Then He began to tell these secrets, these unrevealed things that He had not made known before. That is what he is talking about here. Here is something about salvation that God kept secret to Himself. It was not hidden in the Old Testament, it was hidden in God. In New Testament times, after the Lord Jesus Christ came, these secrets were made known. The mystery has been revealed. The story has been completed. I am sure that there are going to be things about salvation that we will not be able to understand until we get to heaven. But God has completed what He intended to tell us about this wonderful salvation of ours. Regardless of how long we live and how well we know our Bibles, I am sure that we cannot exhaust everything that God has seen fit to reveal to us in His Word.

This is what He is talking about: He has redeemed us, He has forgiven us, He has bestowed upon us all wisdom and prudence, He has given us the capacity to understand these things of God, "Having made known unto us (now) the mystery of his will which is the revelation of His good

pleasure which he has purposed for us in Christ." As I have said to you many, many times, there is only one way of salvation. There was not one way of salvation in the Old Testament and another way of salvation in the New Testament. Salvation in the Old Testament is exactly the same as salvation in the New Testament. Christ is the Redeemer of those who were saved in the Old Testament just as He is the Redeemer of those who have been saved since He came. The story was not completed, the revelation was not given. If it had been completed in the Old Testament, there would have been no need for the New Testament. You see, the New Testament is the crowning revelation, the completion of all that God has been pleased to make known to us as far as this salvation was concerned. At the time His own good pleasure determined He has made known those secrets concerning His will--His will here certainly has to do with salvation--He made known those secrets so that the picture is completed.

Verse 11, as I read to you a moment ago, says concerning our salvation, "we are predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ."

Now. What is this mystery? What is this secret that God has made known?

I have already suggested to you what it is. It is stated there in verse 10, "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him." That is, "even in Christ."

This is one of the purposes that God has in salvation. He mentions the timing of the purpose. That is, "in the dispensation of the fulness of times." This has to do with the future. The purpose itself is "that he might gather together in one all things in Christ." Then, the inclusiveness of that purpose (that is, who is going to be involved in this), "all thing in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him."

Let us look at those for just a moment: the timing of the purpose. When is this going to happen, when He is going to gather together all things in Christ? Well, it is the dispensatio of the fulness of times.

Remember when Paul wrote to the Galatians he spoke of the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ as being the fulness of time. "When the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law" (Gal. 4:4-5). Here he is talking about the times when the Lord Jesus will come back again, the dispensation of the fulness of times. The Bible speaks of time being made up of periods of time. When these periods of time are going to be completed, then the Lord is going to come and He will usher in the final phase of our salvation--gathering together in one all things in Christ. It is called a dispensation. A dispensation, the word itself means an arrangement. God has planned this as the final arrangement for His people. This is what is going to characterize the eternal state of all the people of God. I will get to the inclusiveness of that in just a moment. He is going to gather together in one all things in Christ. I want to remind you this morning that when the Lord undertook to save us, He undertook two gigantic jobs. Two jobs that were utterly impossible if you consider that from a human point of view. One of these is what presently is in the process of taking place in each one of our lives. We are predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son. A part of God's salvation is that we not only are going to be in heaven, but we are going to be like the Lord Jesus Christ. That is not news to most of you here this morning. you know that that is the purpose of salvation. We will be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. What if the responsibility for making that change in your life were put in your hands and yours alone? You and I get discouraged as it is, do we not? When I think how much the Lord has to do in my life before I am going to become like the Lord Jesus Christ, I can really be overwhelmed with discouragement. If I think of this as being my responsibility: that the Lord has saved me and said, "Now, what I want you to do

as My child is to make yourself like the Lord Jesus." I can read the Word and I can pray and I can seek, by the grace of God, to be obedient. I do not know about you, but when the Lord undertook to make me like the Lord Jesus Christ He took on a big, big job, a tremendous job. Think that this is His purpose, not only for all of us here this morning who are saved, but for all of His people. He is going to make every single one of us like the Lord Jesus. We will never be able to sin again. All of the imperfections will be gone. There is always going to be a difference between us and the Lord Jesus because He is the eternal Son of God; but the marvelous grace of God is that He is going to make us like His Son. Only God can do that.

The second thing that is a tremendous job is that He is going to gather together in one all things in Christ. If we started to talk this morning about the differences that we have among ourselves why we could bring out a lot of things, could we not? When you look at the body of Christ throughout the earth and you see the body of Christ in any generation, what do you see? You see schisms. You see divisions. You see this church and that church and the other church. Why, actually, if we could understand, it is the greatest scandal as far as the church is concerned on earth has always been the divisions that exist. It is due to the divisions that people do not have any idea of the oneness of the Body of Christ. Yet He only has one Body. We are all members of that same body. God is working so that someday this is going to be accomplished in the dispensation of the fulness of times. Not only are we going to be like Christ, but all the divisions between us, all the differences, will be gone. This is not a oneness that ignores the truth of the Word of God. We have people today, and I am sure that there have always been people in the world, who are absorbed and consumed with the idea of getting everybody together; but, in most instances, this is the basis of their unification: they say, "Well, the only way that we can get together is for us to forget about the doctrines that we do not agree on and we will just love each other and set the truth aside." That is not the kind of unity that you read about in the Bible. I know people who profess to be Christians but they do not believe in the deity of Christ, they do not really believe that the Bible is all the Word of God. If we are going to be unified with each other, why I have got to forget about Jesus Christ being the Son of God and I have got to forget about the Bible being the Word of God. You see, what you give up are the very basic things to our faith so that if you give up truths like that you have to give up Christ and you have to give up salvation and you have to give up God and you have to give up everything else. The unity that we have is a unity that is in Christ and it is a unity that is based upon the Word of God.

Just in closing, this morning, I want to emphasize this with you. Will you turn to the fourth chapter of the Book of Ephesians because this is a subject that was very, very much upon the heart of the Apostle Paul. There are many Scriptures that I could read to you this morning, but I am going to confine myself to this. Chapter four verse one, where he comes to the practical section of the book and he says, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called." We have been called to salvation. Paul says, "You walk worthy of that calling." "With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Then notice what he says, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph. 4:2-6). He is still talking about that same group of people who are chosen, made sons of God, redeemed, forgiven, bestowed with all wisdom and prudence, capable of understanding this promise of God that He is going to gather us together in one. But here is the basis of our oneness. Not lots of different faiths; one faith, the faith revealed to us in the Word of God.

Now, let your eye run down to verse 11, "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith (yes, the faith), and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man (you see, this is all of us who are becoming this perfect man, the body of Christ), unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind

of doctrine (those winds are blowing on the church today just as they always have been: people are saying that we will just forget doctrine and we will have unity without doctrine--that is not unity at all in terms of Scripture), by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together (you have a picture of the human body here, but it applies to the body of Christ) and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:11-16).

I am going to be dealing with some of these things more in detail as we go through the epistle; but let me just say in closing, this morning, from our text here in chapter one verses 8 through 10 and what we see by way of elaboration in Ephesians.

If we are going to have unity as the people of God, then according to Ephesians chapter 4 it means that we have to grow up in Christ. You see, the reason, and it has always been true, that we have so many divisions in the body of Christ is because we have so many babies in the family of God. I am sure that that is always going to be the case. The way for us as a church to remedy this is for us as leaders in the church, and for each one of us as a part of this fellowship, to make sure that by the grace of God we are growing in our understanding of the truth, we are being strengthened in our belief in these great doctrines of the faith, and by the grace of God we are walking in obedience to this word. It is not to be started on a big organizational basis. You will never have unity that way. Unity in any church, and I am just concerned mainly about Trinity Bible Church this morning--if you and I are to have unity within our own fellowship here, then we have got to be a church of growing saints, growing in our knowledge of the Word. We are not going to throw the Word of God out and say that we will forget about the things that we differ on. We are going to go to the Word of God and find out what the Word of God teaches. The unity that the Bible talks about is a unity that is built upon the Word of God. Then, as we grow the result of spiritual growth is that our attitude toward each other changes. In the same passage where Paul says that we are to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit, he says we walk in holiness and meekness and with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unit of the Spirit; because, you see, when you grow in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ you are becoming more like He is. These words describe what the Lord Jesus was. The Lord Jesus never set the truths aside. The Lord always taught the truth and established the truth. The greatest thing that can be done at Trinity Bible Church for the unity of our fellowship, and I hope that you understand this, is for us to teach the Word and to understand the Word and to believe the Word and to obey the Word. As God works in our hearts, there will be a fellowship among us that will be a foretaste of that time in the dispensation of the fulness of times that God by His grace gathers together all who are in Christ, Old Testament and New Testament, one people of God, one in Christ, rejoicing in this wonderful redemption that is ours because of His wonderful grace.

I trust that this will become clear to us and that you will see that you need to grow as a Christian. Not only for your own blessing, but for God's blessing upon Trinity Bible Church and beyond that for the blessing of God upon the body of Christ throughout the world.