

Sunday 22nd July 2018
The Mystery of God's purposes.

One of the most wonderful messages of the Bible is this, life is not meaningless. For many people life is busy, and there is little encouragement to consider the big questions of life. I think the encouragement to have a 'bucket list' and the number of web adverts telling us things we have to do, or places we have to visit before we die, is evidence of this. All our attention is about living the 'experience.' You no longer go to the zoo or wildlife park, you go for the wildlife park experience. You no longer go to Orkney, you go for the 'Orkney experience.' It may just be a marketing ploy, but I think it is something more. It is an attempt to give value and meaning to people who have never realized what life is about. It is a means by which we try to tell ourselves that our living have a meaning, we saw the world.

Personally, I have very few desires to see the world. What I have seen of it so far shows me that it is much the same all over! However, I am looking forward to seeing the new heavens and earth, for they last forever, and by then, I will live forever. Perhaps then we can explore at leisure! We are all on a journey, to a destination, heaven or hell. Life will not just continue on, repeat after repeat, empire following empire, fortunes made, and fortunes lost, seas polluted, rivers drying up. It will all come to an end the Bible tells us, and God will make a new heaven and a new earth, where none of the evil we live with today will exist.

Ephesians 1 verse 9 and 10 tells us the purpose of life. The mystery of the plan of God, mystery because it is so vast that it does not enter into the imaginations of people apart from God showing them. This mystery is that Christ is to fill the heavens and the earth, to be the center of all things, of all life and of everything which shall be forever.

This has all been put into effect by the Cross and by His resurrection. By faith in Christ we enter into the 'experience' of Christ, of being born again and so becoming even now, part of the New Creation which will come into effect when Christ returns and brings this present world to an end.

Before all this reaches completion, people will continue to come to believe in Christ, becoming part of this New Creation, and being sanctified, changed, to become more and more transformed to the image of Christ.

Today, we are going to look at how this is being worked today in believers. It is working today as it has always been worked over the ages, and as it will be worked until the end of the age. So, the question is, how does God work the New Creation in people?

I am framing it in these terms because so many of us think that our being Christians is a small thing, perhaps a very personal thing. However, the Bible shows us that a Christian is a fledgling member of God's New Creation, and as such we have cosmic significance, and a huge 'experience' to enter upon now, and an even greater 'experience' to come.

God has always worked in Trinity. Wherever we see a reference to God working in the Bible, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are working in harmony, one never acts without the other members of the Trinity, even though the specific work may be ascribed to the Father or the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

In Genesis 1 verses 1-2 and 26, we have the creation story where God speaks in plurality, and the Spirit is said to brood over the sea. These verses are taken to show that all of the members of the Trinity were working together in creation.

In John 14 verses 15-17, Jesus speaks concerning the gift of the Father which is the Holy Spirit. Here, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all shown to be acting in accord as regards the salvation and continuance of the work of Salvation. In v 23 Jesus says that the Father and Son and Spirit will abide with the new Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 1 verse 22 tells us that this coming of the Holy Spirit into a new believer is the deposit, which is the guarantee of all that is to come. The Christian life now is a taster of all that is to come, and the place where we grow to be fitted for the fullness of life to come. This mortal life is not an end in itself, but is the short time we are given to prepare for the eternal life to come!

An aside. It is neither right nor wrong to go about having experiences of this world. What matters is this, do the things we do and the places we go do our souls good or not? If something in this world causes us to grow in grace and faith and love, then it will do us good. It will cause us to grow spiritually. If something we do, or somewhere we go does not contribute to our spiritual growth, then it is at best insignificant, and at worse, harmful to our souls. This is the way to regard things if we accept that this life is given to us to prepare our souls for eternal life.

Let us now consider how it is that we are to grow in this life. We are to grow in holiness, in likeness, and conformity to Christ. The answer to this question is not a list of things that we do, it is about our relationship to a member of the Trinity. The member of the Trinity who is specifically assigned to the work of having us changed and made ready for eternity is the Holy Spirit. Everything that the Father has planned to accomplish as regards our salvation is done in actuality by Christ. Everything that Christ has accomplished by His death and resurrection is made effective and applied to us by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is in heaven at the right hand of the Father, but is with us by the Holy Spirit.

We can therefore say that the mystery of God, His plan to save, is effected on earth by the Holy Spirit.

Let us look at the passage in Luke 11 verses 1 to 13. Luke gives his account of Jesus giving the Lord's Prayer, and He continues on with a parable to underline the importance of prayer, and the importance God gives to us believing that He is a prayer answering God.

Verse 1 gives us the circumstances of this account by Luke. Jesus was praying, and many Scriptures tell us and show us that Jesus prayed in a way that no one had ever been heard praying before. We cannot prove it, but I can imagine that when Jesus said the name 'Father', He did so with an affection and intimacy no one had ever imagined was possible. I have said this to us all many times, and I know very few of you believe me, but no one is naturally born a praying person. Every believer has to learn to pray, and only believers can pray to their Father in heaven. It has been a great sadness to me over many years that so many people in the Church, of all denominations, have little or no experience in prayer, or avoid it utterly. If we live a prayerless life, then either we are living like the Prodigal as dead to God, or like the older brother, estranged from Father. Children who do not start to speak to their parents are taken to the doctor because there is something wrong with them! Prayerless believers do not exist, cannot exist. Come and learn to pray, everyone who prays is still in the school of prayer, P1, or P2, or P3, but we are all still in the primary school of prayer, so come.

The parable Jesus tells is of the friend who comes after midnight. In the ancient near east, the custom was that if a traveler came to your village, it was the duty of the village to show hospitality. Therefore to have a late visitor and go to a neighbour's house if you had no provision was not an unreasonable thing to do. The word translated 'boldness' has the connotation of shame. This is not saying that it is shameful to have no supplies, nor does it mean that it is shameful to go to a friend's house to ask for provision. What it is saying is that it would be shameful for a friend not to give supply. The hint is that the hearers of this parable would be shocked at the shame that the unwilling friend would bring to the whole village if he continued to refuse to meet the request for food for a visitor.

Jesus then rocks the socks off His hearers by turning the story around and applying it to God. In this application, God is the friend who is approached at midnight for provision. Jesus is not saying that God will make excuses for not responding to the request for aid. On the contrary, He is saying that just as it is unimaginable that a friend will not get up and give supply, so it would be a matter of shame if God does not respond to our requests.

Jesus then goes on to press the matter in stronger ways still. He asks His listeners to think of parenthood. Even bad fathers love their children and supply their needs. Even in our day, if we hear of fathers who walk out on their families or waste the money on themselves, on boy's toys or drink, drugs or gamble it away, we tend to be most censorious of all such, and rightly so. We may say they need a good hiding, or help, or counseling, but what they most need is God and Repentance. No matter how we regard them, we regard it as a matter of shame that they do not care for their children.

In the same way, Jesus tells us that if evil fathers still care for their children, then how much more will God care and supply His children since He is a perfect Father! The whole thrust of this passage is to contrast the generosity of fallen, sinful fathers, with the generosity that we will receive from a perfect Father. Jesus is giving the strongest possible encouragement and instruction on prayer.

One of the reasons that there is so little prayer in the Church in the Western World is that we are so self-assured, independent and self-sufficient. We are like the Church in Laodicea in revelation 3. We think we are well off, we have all we need, but we are poor when it comes to spiritual riches. Do consider this, it does matter. If we find that most of our praying is for God to give us things, then we are missing the point, and it may in part explain why so many people have little experience of answered prayer. The highest praying is for God to give us Himself, not just things which will pass away!

Jesus does not finish with these encouragements to pray. He goes on to give us what the subject of our prayer should be. We are to pray for more fillings of the Holy Spirit, we are to ask that the principle of life would fill us and keep on filling us.

Jesus is telling us that it is the will of the Father that we be so filled. He is telling us that the reason the Son of God went to the Cross and suffered all He did was so that we who are creatures and will ever remain creatures may be more and more filled and so conformed to the likeness and image of Christ. We are being told that this is the desire of the Holy Spirit to dwell in us and with us and so fill us with the life of Christ. Christ is also telling us that we are to ask for this continual filling.

Why are we to ask? There are probably many reasons, but here is one that strikes a chord with me. We only value what we have to expend our energy on. We only value something which is costly. We are to ask because only in this way will we value the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is to be an issue with us. Probably few of us like to go too long without a shower because we are sensitive to what people will think and say about us if we are dirty all the time. It is the same with the Holy Spirit, we need to care about Him and about having Him. The way God keeps us from presuming upon the Holy Spirit is by having us ask, and to do so daily.

Paul tells us to carry the fragrance of Christ, not the stink of the world. It is the Holy Spirit in us who is the fragrance of Christ. Forget the smelly perfumes and aftershaves! Here is the fragrance of all fragrances, the one that turns the Father's head when He smells it, the fragrance of a Christ-like life, the working of the Holy Spirit in us!

Have we received the Holy Spirit? Have we believed in Christ alone for our future? We must ask and receive. The promise is underlined by Jesus. If we ask, we will receive the Holy Spirit.

To have a people who are full of the Holy Spirit, is the means by which God will accomplish His great plan to have Christ as all in all for all eternity. There is no other way, there is no other means. Therefore ask, seek, knock for more infilling of the Holy Spirit.