

The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson
Romans 16:25-27
"The Mystery"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We turn to Romans chapter 16, verse 25 through 27 for our concluding Scripture reading in the Epistle to the Romans. Usually Paul in concluding his epistles has a brief doxology and benediction, but this one is probably the lengthiest of all his writings, and therefore it has some uniqueness about it, and undoubtedly the apostle wished that we consider it rather carefully. So, I hope to satisfy him by considering it fairly carefully.

The apostle now having just had Tertius write, "I, Tertius, who wrote the epistle, greet you in the Lord." Reference has been made to Gaius, his host in Corinth where he was staying at the time. The whole church greets the church in Rome. Erastus the chamberlain of the city was singled out for special mention, and finally, Quartus, the fourth, a brother, a slave. Then we said verse 24 is probably not genuine, being repeated in some of the earlier manuscripts from verse 20 with a slight addition. So that now the apostle pins his final words:

"Now to him (it is rather striking, isn't it, that he has talked about all of these individual believers, but now he turns from the individual believers, and even from the author of the epistle, to the Lord.) Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: To God only wise, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever."

Now, I have modified that last; someone the other day said, Dr. Johnson, you really need glasses because you are not reading too well these days. Well, I felt a bit of conviction because I'm right on the borderline of needing glasses for public reading, but I had already said many years ago, when that came I would resign from preaching. And so, I am trying to hold out as long I as possibly can. [Laughter] But in this case, those differences are not due to that, they are due to the fact that I was trying to give you a fairly accurate rendering of the original text, by memory, at that point. For here the apostle probably has written, "To God only wise, through Jesus Christ, to whom (And the whom is probably a reference back to God the Father, rather than Christ.) To whom be glory forever. Amen."

May the Lord bless the reading of his word. Let's bow together, now, in a moment of prayer.

[prayer removed from audio]

[Message] I want you to know that when I stop today at 12:00 on the dot, it's not because I'm sick, but I have a speaking engagement in Chicago tonight and have to catch

a 1:00 plane. And so, it's a pretty good chance that you will be able to get out at 12:00 today. Isn't that nice? [Laughter] Don't answer. [Laughter]

The subject for today is "The Mystery." We've come to the last paragraph of the apostle's letter, a doxology, and it is devoted to the importance of being established in God's secret or God's mystery.

One might ask the question, why is the apostle so concerned about being established in God's secret or God's mystery or the gospel that Paul preached? Well, in the first place, it's very important pragmatically, because psychological health depends upon being centered solidly in the word of God. Do you remember what the apostle wrote to the Galatian believers? After the apostle had preached the gospel to them -- the gospel of the grace of God, Judaizing false teachers had come in and had said, "Well, Paul taught what was right so far as he went. But unfortunately, the apostle did not go on to say that not only must one believe in Christ to be saved, but one must also be circumcised." And by so doing, they were corrupting the gospel of God, so Paul said.

When he wrote his letter to them, however, he also commented upon their spiritual condition. He said "Where is then the blessedness that you spoke of? For I bear you witness, that if it had been possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and have given them to me when I preached the gospel to you at the first." They were overjoyed to hear the message of grace. They were so happy over what the apostle had told them that, evidently, since he had eye difficulties, they were willing to have plucked out their own eyes and given them to Paul. Such is the happiness that comes to those who understand the grace of God.

But something has changed. False doctrine has been imbibed, and as a result, the blessedness, the sense of the enjoyment of the things of the Lord and the sense of the enjoyment of life has gone. Legalism will do that, of course. And the apostle, tracing it back to that, says "your blessedness has gone." In order for us to be truly, psychologically, spiritually healthy, it is important that we have a grasp of sound doctrine. Of course, it is also theologically important, too, because our mind determines our actions.

When the disciples met the Lord on the Emmaus road, they were the most despairing of men, because there is no despair like disappointment in Jesus Christ himself. And they had great hopes of him. They had hopes of being victorious through him spiritually, and also, ultimately victorious through him over the Romans who had them in bondage. But in view of his death, their hopes were gone. "We hoped that it should have been he who was to redeem Israel", they said. And the Lord Jesus said,

"Oh fools and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have written. Ought not Messiah to have suffered these things and to enter into his glory. And then beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

Despair, disappointment, defeat, simply because they did not know the Scriptures.

Now I think I can understand why Paul is so concerned that the churches to whom he ministers understand truth and be established in it. Have you ever had a desire to be established in the truth of the Bible? Many people think they're actually established now, when as one of my friends said, they are really just stuck in the mud.

To be established reminds me of a problem we all have had. Have you ever tried to set up a card table on picnic grounds? We have a place outside our family room which is still a little uneven because of the putting in of a pipe. And there is a table out there and we like to go out and have a cup of coffee on it, but we have to move the table around to get the legs, where there are four or three, I've forgotten for the moment, but the legs have to be put on even ground in order that it might be stable. Well, the apostle would like for his readers to be stable. Established is the term that he uses, made firm.

This past week I had a friend come to visit me. He was in town, in great spiritual turmoil over the past four or five weeks or so, really great difficulties, all traceable to the fact that, while he knew what the Bible taught on a point, he had been persuaded by the experiences of others that they were right in what they were doing, and he was very closely involved with this, it involved his own wife. They had been persuaded, he had been by the persuasiveness of those who said "we have this experience from the Lord," and the result was weeks of turmoil, anxiety, despair and defeat until finally he realized that he must take a stand for what the Scriptures say. Really, many of our difficulties come because we have not taken a stand for what the Bible says.

Now, this is one of the most carefully constructed and characteristic benedictions in the Pauline letters. It's lengthy and, therefore, it would appear to be in the mind of Paul, at least, an important addition. I have a hunch that when we got to about verse 24 and Tertius is taking the apostle's dictation, that he's reached the end of the dictation and he hesitates for a moment and the apostle says, 'read it over for me Tertius', and so Tertius reads the whole letter over, the apostle being sure that everything is just as he would like for it to be for the Romans. And then he said, 'I think I'd like to add a doxology now Tertius'. And so, what we have here is the Pauline autographic addition to the matter that Tertius has already read to him.

Now against the background of this doxology, we have those words of warning in verse 17 and 18. He had just said:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own body; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the innocent".

So the apostle is disturbed because there are those who have fair speeches, good words, and they are seducing the believers. And if they are not already doing it, the danger is there. It always is there. Down through the centuries, illustration after illustration of the seducing of believers by fair words and fair speeches of those whose lives and also thinking is contrary to the word of God. The apostle, at this point, says, however, it's Paul who has been writing to you. And now he turns from the weak author and his amanuensis to the one who is really able to establish them. "Now to him that is of power to establish you according to my gospel."

That expression reminds me of a passage that I want to expound to the theological faculty of Trinity Seminary this evening. The apostle in the 20th chapter of the book of Acts, speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus at Miletus, after he has given them his exhortation and in which he has urged them to take heed to the flock of God over which the Holy Ghost has appointed them as overseers, says, "And now, brethren, I

commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among them who are sanctified."

So the apostle characteristically turns now to the Lord. It is he who is able to give that which is necessary for establishment in the things of God. One of the old puritans said once, "One almighty is more than all mighties." Now Paul was a mighty, and James was a mighty and Peter was a mighty. But one almighty is worth more than all these other mighties, including Augustine, including Paul, including Luther, including Whitefield. "One almighty is greater." And so he turns them to him who is able to establish them.

Now in turning to them, he first of all speaks about the God who establishes. He says, "Now to him that is of power, (or who is able) to establish you". It is clear from the apostle's thinking here, that he thinks that biblical strength is not self-derived. We do not have strength of ourselves. It is of him. Now to him who is able to strengthen you. So that fundamentally in the understanding of spiritual truth is the knowledge, not only that the revelation of truth or illumination must take place first, but even then all of our strength comes from the Lord. Now the fact that he can do everything is very encouraging. And therefore, all that we need is available from him.

I heard of a little boy once who was in a Sunday school class and the teacher had given a series of lessons on God's attributes. And she had just expounded God's omnipotence. And she asked the class, "Pupils, is there anything that God cannot do?" Now of course, there are some things God cannot do. He cannot make a square circle. He cannot make two and two equal five. He cannot do things that are contrary to his own nature, nor would he wish to do things contrary to his nature. But when she said, "Is there anything God cannot do?" there was silence. And finally one fellow held up his hand. The teacher was rather disappointed that the boy held up his hand, because she thought the lesson's point has been missed. There is nothing that God cannot do she was thinking. So she looked at the boy somewhat resignedly and said, "Well, just what is it that God can't do?" And the little boy said, "Well, he can't please everybody."

[Laughter] A rather wise comment and very effective in that particular circumstance too.

But Paul thinks of him as one who has sufficient power to establish the Romans according to his gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ.

Now, notice that when he says, "Now unto him who is able" he says he is able to strengthen, able to establish. Now I would think that in the light of the context, the apostle has in view these seducers who with fair speeches and with good words are deceiving the hearts of the gullible, the innocent.

Many in Christian circles are very innocent, very gullible. They are very gullible about spiritual things. It's amazing. They're not gullible about other things. They're not gullible in finance, business, management, philosophy, whatever. Many of you are teachers, but in spiritual things we can be very gullible. And fair speeches and good words tend to be very deceptive if they are given with a smile. And we tend to think because we are living in the age of great stress, over-stress, on the love of God at the expense of the justice of God, we are inclined to think that if it's said in the right spirit, it must be good. Well, here are good speeches and good words, but they are deceptive words.

Now the apostle is not only thinking of that, that God is able to establish us in spite of these deceptive words of the false believers, but he is also thinking about the

whole realm of evangelical doctrine. "Now unto him who is able to establish you according to my gospel." The whole body of evangelical doctrine is proper for believers to have. Now there can be no firmness of inner life in general, nor can there be that impregnable spiritual consistency, which we all ought to have, apart from Paul's gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ. That's the norm of the establishment. The establishment is only in harmony with the gospel.

Now when Paul uses the term gospel, he doesn't mean simply Christ died for us, Christ was buried, Christ was raised on the third day, Christ was seen. But by the term gospel, he has in view the whole of the good news that he preached. Romans is the exposition of his gospel. So, establishment is only in harmony with the gospel. "Now to him that has the power to establish you according to my gospel."

Now what is important about that is simply this principle: The power of God acts only in agreement with the thought of God. Let me say it again because this principle is very important and many of us overlook it. The power of God acts only in agreement with the thought of God. God does not do anything that is contrary to his word. He never does anything contrary to his word. His word is the expression of his nature. He does not violate his nature. If you can show that the Bible teaches a certain thing, God will never do the opposite or differently. He always acts in accordance with his word.

Now this week I had a man visit me. I made reference to him. He visited me about the relationship that he and his wife and others have had. I don't have time to go into the details of it, but this man was a Christian man. Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in Ashkelon, lest the uncircumcised from some other congregation hear, but a few years back, they spent two years in Believers Chapel sitting in the congregation, so they told me. They have listened to the tapes off and on in Believers Chapel. Recently, because there are several families living together, one of them, the wife of this man, announced that she and the husband of another one of couples had been given a love for one another by God, and that, therefore, they were seeking a divorce from their particular mates. I say I won't go into all the details because it's not all that edifying, but the point is very important. Now this man was a man who had some knowledge of the Scripture, even presented himself to me as a former teacher of the word of God. He knew what the Bible taught. He said I never had any doubt about what the Bible taught about marriage and divorce. There was no unfaithfulness at that point involved. It was just that God had given them a love for each other. And he said they were so persuasive that I became convinced that it was of God, even though I knew that the Bible did not teach that. And so I publicly acknowledged that it appeared to me that it was of God, that my wife should marry another man, because they so convincingly persuaded us that it was of God. The result was that the same thing happened with several other couples, because usually error tends to spread. Truth has difficulty spreading.

Well, the man has finally come to himself and has realized that experience is never to determine the teaching of the word of God. We are not guided by experience in spiritual things; we are to be guided by the word of God. Paul calls it his gospel or the preaching of Jesus Christ. That's expegetical or explanatory of his gospel. What is his gospel? Why, it's the preaching of Jesus Christ. What the Bible says about sin, what the Bible says about salvation, what the Bible says about the person of Christ, what the Bible says about the work of Christ, what the Bible says about the past, what the Bible says

about the future, what the Bible says about the present, all of these things are in Paul's gospel and are part of the preaching of Jesus Christ.

And he says God establishes us in accordance with his gospel and in accordance with the preaching of Christ. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer at Dallas Seminary used to tell us at seminary, "Men, preach an accurate gospel." He saw that it was important that we present the gospel accurately. Therefore, we avoided such things as "open up your heart to the Lord Jesus." Why? There is nothing wrong with someone saying that. I wouldn't say, "Wow, you're a heretic for saying that," but you see the difference in emphasis. Instead of having the divine emphasis, it has the human emphasis. It's very easy to fall into these things that are not necessarily evil; they're just a bad influence. So he used to say to us, "Preach an accurate gospel."

Now, let me go further. There is a very wide movement in Christianity today not simply among the Charismatics, the holy hunch bunch [Laughter], but also among other evangelicals to the end that human experience determines what we are to do. The Bible is speaking very plainly on many points, but 'God has spoken to me', 'God has performed this miracle', or 'God has put me in such a circumstance and it's clear to see that it was of God', but often contrary to the word of God. 'God gave me the gift of tongues', when as far as I can tell, the gift of tongues biblically speaking is not being given today. Or 'God gave the gift of miracles', when as far as I can tell, the gift of miracles as set forth in the Bible is not being given today.

Experience determines the teaching of the word of God. You notice, if you listen to channel thirteen and programs like that, that's the kind of thing that you get over and over and over again. And as far as the great doctrines of the faith, you won't find them there. You won't find them there. Some familiar words are used, but you won't find expositions of the great doctrines of the faith there. You won't find expositions of the Pauline epistles, the Pauline truth or the truth of the New Testament, only references here and there and great stress on experience. You'll be a very unhealthy Christian, if that's your diet. Paul says,

"Now unto him that is able to establish you according to the gospel that I preach and the preaching concerning Jesus Christ. (That is found in the Scriptures. Now he says also,) according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret since the world began but now has been made manifest, and made known through the Scriptures of the prophets".

What does Paul refer to here? Well now when he says "according to" he means that the norm of his gospel, the standard by which the truth and preaching concerning Jesus Christ is to be judged, is the revelation of this mystery. What is the mystery about which Paul is speaking? What is a biblical mystery? Perhaps we should begin there. What is a biblical mystery? What is a biblical secret? Not something mysterious, but simply a truth unrevealed for a lengthy period of time which needs divine illumination for us to understand.

Now there are different aspects of the mystery referred to in Paul. He says great is the mystery of godliness and then sets forth six things that concern the Lord Jesus Christ. That is one aspect of the mystery. In 1 Corinthians chapter 15, he says "Behold, I

show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed." And he refers to the rapture of the church. That's part of the mystery, but an aspect of it.

He also in Colossians says "the mystery which is Christ in you". That's a mystery, Christ in you. But if you look at that in the original text, he means "in you Gentiles". That's the thing about it that's significant -- Christ in the Gentiles.

The greatest exposition of the mystery in its fulness is found in Ephesians chapter 3: verse 3 through verse 12. I'll just read a few of these verses because I think that to understand what Paul says about the revelation of the mystery kept secret, manifested, made known in Romans 16, to understand that, we need to understand this. Now Paul is speaking to the Ephesians and he says that he is a "prisoner of Jesus Christ for the Gentiles." He said:

"If you've heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given to me (by me or given me) toward you. (That's Ephesians 3:2) How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; as I wrote before in few words, (that's a reference to chapters, probably chapter 2 of this epistle or perhaps the end of Romans 16) By which, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ. 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; That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel:"

What is the mystery? Why, it is not the fact that Gentiles are to be saved. The Old Testament teaches that. What is the mystery? Is it the revelation of the gospel now? No, the gospel, the apostle says in Romans chapter 1, was something that was promised beforehand in the writings of the prophets. What is this that was hidden, now manifested and made known -- the mystery? Why verse 6 tells us. "That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ by the gospel."

In the Old Testament Gentiles were blessed through the Jews. But now as a result of the apostolic preaching through Paul and the revelation of the mystery, by what has happened as well as by what was revealed to Paul, preeminently Paul and other New Testament prophets, it is clear that now Gentiles are not only saved as Jews, but they are saved on the same grounds, and they also possess the same blessings, "That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, fellow members of the same body, and partakers of the promise by the gospel." So the apostle regards Jew and Gentile as being united in Christ in the present day. That is the mystery, the union of Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ on equal grounds. Now I think that's extremely important and I think it's something that we need to bear constantly in mind. The apostle considered that to be an important matter for the establishment of the believers.

Now let's go on. What does he mean when he says here that it was hidden? He says concerning this secret, it was kept secret since the world began. Without going into great detail, because I don't have that much time, it's probable that the apostle means from the time of the creation to the time of Christ. In the ages of world history expressed there, a hush had come by divine desire over the revelation of the future relationship between Jew and Gentile. This great teaching of the mystery was enwrapped in the silence of the past, but now it has been manifested. Three times the apostle says, "Now it has been manifested". Here, in Ephesians chapter 3, in Colossians chapter 1, he draws a

contrast in each place between the past and now. So he thinks of this as something now manifested. The public manifestation has been expressed in what Paul and the apostles saw happening, but it also was revealed to them and the explanation of what was happening came to them from Lord God.

It is sometimes asked was this truth absolutely unknown in Old Testament times or only relatively unknown, that is very little said about it? Well now, the apostle draws a contrast in these passages I've referred to and he talks about the revelation "now". That's generally his emphasis. But what about that statement in Ephesians 3, "As it is now revealed to his holy apostles and prophets"? Well, "as" is usually a word of comparison isn't it? That might suggest that it was revealed a bit in the Old Testament days, but now there's been a great manifestation and revelation of it so it's not as it was in the past. But then we use as in a negative way, too. We say the sun doesn't shine in the nighttime as it does in the day. But by that we mean it doesn't shine in the day at all. As then negates an expression. I think in the light of the apostle's "nows" and in the light of his specific statement it was "kept secret since the world began", that he refers to an absolute hidden-ness of this great truth of Jew and Gentile being one in the body of Christ in the present day.

But what about true prophetic writings? Does he not say here "but now is made manifest and made known by the Scriptures of the prophets"? Well strictly speaking, if that was the way that the text should be rendered, then we probably would say he must have in mind the Old Testament prophets. He says the "Scriptures of the prophets." But when you look at this in the original text, the statement is simply "through prophetic writings".

Now that opens up possibilities in the first place, because there are New Testament prophets as well as Old Testament prophets. And furthermore, in the apostle's writings in Ephesians, he has three times made reference to "apostles and prophets." He talked about the church being built upon the "apostles and prophets." Notice the order, not prophets and apostles as you might expect, but "apostles and prophets." Then he says this mystery is made known to "apostles and prophets." And then in the fourth chapter, the church has been given certain gifts, first, apostles, secondarily prophets. So it's very likely, particularly since he uses one article with the two nouns, it's very likely that he thinks of these prophets as being New Testament prophets.

So when he says here through prophetic writings, not the writings of the prophets, there are no articles in this expression, but through prophetic writings, he means through writings in which revelation takes place because that's what a prophet does, he gives divine revelation. So, the revelation of the mystery through prophetic writings is through the writings of men like Paul. He's talking about himself and others who have come to an understanding of this mystery, so that this mystery is now manifested and made known through prophetic writings.

Of course, the logic of the passage would teach you that. He's just said it's hidden and now it's made known. That would let you know right there that how can it be known through the prophets if it's only manifested and made known "now". Furthermore, Peter didn't know it. He had great difficulty in Acts 10 and 11 with understanding that Gentiles were to be saved just like Jews. Angels evidently are ignorant of it because Paul says that angels are learning from the church, in Ephesians 3. So, I'm then inclined to think that he says establishment in divine truth today is very closely related to what God is doing

among the Gentiles, and how he's been preaching to the Gentiles and the Gentiles are now incorporated in the one body and Christ is in us personally and also in Gentiles on the same grounds as he is in the Jews.

Paul says it's by "the commandment of the everlasting God." That was the commission that he was given specifically. He refers to himself here as the apostle of the Gentiles. And when he says "commandment of the everlasting God," there's overtones of grace there, because it is clear that it is God who is responsible for this truth.

Now I know people sit in an audience like this, I can tell by looking at the faces of some of you, you are thinking "Is this really all that important?" Well think about who is speaking here. This is the Apostle Paul writing and he is saying to his Roman Christians I want you to be established, and these are the things I want you to know. He regarded them as extremely important for their establishment. He goes on to add "made known to all nations for the obedience of faith."

And finally in the last verse, because I do have to catch that plane, this verse resumes what was begun in the opening of the doxology, "power to God only wise." He's just said "Now to him that is of power" in verse 27; in other words, power relevant to establishment is found in God. That power now becomes wisdom, because he's talking about God's great plan for the nation and the nations which will ultimately lead to Israel's restoration and blessing to the whole of the world. He says, "To God only wise, through Jesus Christ." This epithet is chosen because of the revelation of the mystery, his plan. He is God only wise through Jesus Christ. In other words, his wisdom is related to the things that concern the Lord Jesus Christ.

I heard of a professor who was giving an economics final exam at the end of the first semester before Christmas, and one of the students wrote on his paper "Only God knows the answer to these questions, Merry Christmas." Well the professor graded the paper shortly after that and he wrote a note on the paper too. His note was "God gets one hundred, you get zero. Happy New Year." [Laughter] Well the wisdom of God is referred to here, the wisdom manifested through Jesus Christ in this great plan which made such a great impression upon the apostle Paul, and so he says to him be glory forever.

Now I close by just a comment or two here. God is able to strengthen in the truth conformably to its universal proclamation according to his will. He's able because he's the all powerful God. He's the God who has everything that we need. He has all power to defend us. He has all wisdom to direct us. He has all mercy to pardon us. He has all grace to enrich us. He has all righteousness to clothe us. He has all goodness to supply us with all of our needs. And he has all joy and all happiness to crown us with joy and happiness.

This should be an earnest exhortation to us to renew our commitment to fulfill the mystery of God personally and the realization of the indwelling Christ in us who are Gentiles and in Jewish believers in the body of Christ, of course, and nationally as we see God completing his great task which is to gather a people, largely Gentile at the present time, into the body of Christ with believing Jews to the end that Israel the nation may be provoked to jealousy, may ultimately respond again as a nation, be saved and the whole world be blessed. That's why it was so important to Paul. This was part of God's plan to the ultimate blessing of the whole of the earth. And you and I have the privilege of being a partner with God in the work that he is doing.

It's not surprising that Johann Albrecht Bengel, the great German commentator—
pietistic commentator whose works are so well-known, who really is the founder of
modern premillennialism, said when he finished his words on Romans "and let every
believing reader say Amen." That's what we say.

May we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for these wonderful words from the
apostle Paul. We sense that in the 20th Century, we often do not realize how important it
is that we grasp what Thou art doing. O God, use us as instrumentalities in the
accomplishment of thy great purpose. We know Thou art all powerful ...

[RECORDING ENDS ABRUPTLY]