**EPHESIANS**

**An Introduction**

**“The Secret God Couldn’t Keep”**

H

ow would you feel if all your beliefs were suddenly obsolete? You’re slavishly trying to be all Kosher all the time about food, clothing, work and rest, guilt, forgiveness and your very acceptance by God. But now … IT’S GONE!

In the 1st century cultures are colliding: Judaism’s animal sacrifices; Greek philosophers; Roman power; Eastern mysticism; and this Carpenter from Nazareth. What’s a person to believe?

**From Saul to Paul**

Six years after Jesus Christ returned to heaven, Saul from Tarsus, an elite theologian in Judaism’s strictest sect, is, “in the name of God,” stalking Jews who worship Jesus. Suddenly felled by a blinding light he hears, “Saul, why are you persecuting me? I’m Jesus.” Let’s read Acts 7:59-8:3 (p. 816, NIV), 9:1-19.

DISCUSS: How do you vet information that challenges your core beliefs?

**Gospel, Gospel, Who’s Got The Gospel?**

Jesus came (to earth) “only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” but heard them shout, “Crucify Him” (Matthew 15:24; John 1:11).

He preached “THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM,” telling His disciples to proclaim this KINGDOM GOSPELonly to Jews. “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ’Repent, for THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN is at hand” (Matthew 4:17, 9:35, 10:5-8).

Peter, an unschooled angler, traveled three years with Jesus. After Christ’s ascension he’s still pitching the KINGDOM GOSPEL: “Repent and turn to God, so your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that He may send the Christ … (who) must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as He promised …” (Acts 3:12 -26).

Peter is flailing, clinging to legalistic Judaism but awakening to Paul’s radically inclusive message of God’s grace and forgiveness. Let’s read Acts 10:1-48 (p. 818).

**Paradigm Shift Hits The Fan**

Why the epochal transition from God’s pre-resurrection to His post-resurrection Gospel? Our Lord, the perfect, sinless Sacrifice, had paid the full price to pardon our sin, voiding the need for an annual Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Prior to Christ’s death you had to “endure to the end” to be “saved,” whereas today “Nothing can separate us from God’s love” (Hebrews 3:6,14, 10:26-27; Romans 8:1, 38-39; 2 Corinthians 5:19).

Had He been welcomed as Messiah, Jesus would have begun His KINGDOM on earth, i.e. the Millennium -- 1,000 years of peace with Christ ruling in Jerusalem as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, as predicted by God’s prophets (Revelation 20:4-6).

**All for One, One for All**

To defog the kerfuffle over whether circumcision must be added to personal faith to earn salvation, the opposing sides weigh in on the GOSPEL OF THE CIRCUMCISION and the GOSPEL OF THE UNCIRCUMCISION (Romans 3:21-24). Let’s read Acts 15:1-29 (p. 823), Galatians 2:1-21 (p. 865).

After the crucifixion God could have launched the 7-year Great Tribulation. This calamity *will* yet occur, concluding with Christ’s “second coming” when Jesus returns to earth to defeat Satan. Then comes the Millennium. Instead, God inserts an unprophecied age of grace. Soon after the crucifixion God hits the pause button in His plan to bring THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN to earth, focused on the Jews (Genesis 12:1-3; Deuteronomy 7:6).

This “temporary” freeze-frame begins when Paul introduces the GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD. This “saved by faith alone” Gospel is called “THE SECRET” or “THE MYSTERY” since God had never revealed it until the ascended Christ entrusted it to Paul, Saul’s Roman name (2 Corinthians 12:2-4; 2 Timothy 1:8-14). Let’s read Galatians 1:11-24 (p. 865).

Paul is sent to tell Gentiles that all people (every ethnicity, gender or class) can know God personally, without needing a rabbi or priest to have their sins forever forgiven and forgotten (Romans 1:16-17, 4:4-8, 5:1, 6:23).

DISCUSS: Why did God choose Saul as His first emissary to the Gentiles?

**Got Church?**

THE SECRET ushers in “the Church, the Body of Christ” which consists of all followers of Christ. Its core truth is that all who trust in Jesus are placed “in Christ” as a member of the “Body of Christ” with Jesus as Head (Colossians 1:15-18, 3:1-17, 23-24).

The stoning of Stephen kicked off this parenthesis in God’s KINGDOM program. Let’s contrast (1) Christ’s message before the cross and (2) Peter’s message after the cross with (3) Christ’s SECRET as revealed by Paul. Let’s read Matthew 24:3-14 (p. 737); Romans 3:21-26 (p. 838); Ephesians 2:8-9 (p. 869), 3:1-6; Titus 3:3-7 (p. 887); 2 Peter 3:10-16 (p. 904).

DISCUSS: How do God’s KINGDOM and SECRET programs differ?

When Christ comes in the air (the “Rapture”) to take all believers to be with Him always, God will resume His KINGDOM plan to defeat Satan at the end of the Tribulation (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

**Entering Ephesus**

If Saul had gone to Ephesus with no Damascus Road experience, he’d have been a persecutor, not a preacher; an egotist, not an evangelist; a murderer, not a messenger! Mercifully, God removed his religious cataracts, giving him a crystal clear vision of the Father’s undying love for all the world – and a passion to share it. No Damascus, no Ephesians. When and where was your Damascus?

His Deal

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