

# The Summation of All Things in Christ

Studies in Ephesians with a Local Church Emphasis

LESSON XLI : DIGRESSION #2 - PAUL AS MINISTER OF THE MYSTERY TO THE GENTILES (3:1-13)

*For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, whereby, 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 fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship 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, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him. Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory. (Eph 3:1-13 KJV)*

*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. (Eph 3:1-13 NIV)*

*For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you the nations, if, indeed, ye did hear of the dispensation of the grace of God that was given to me in regard to you, that by revelation He made known to me the secret, according as I wrote before in few [words] — in regard to which ye are able, reading [it], to understand my knowledge in the secret of the Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it was now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit — that the nations be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in the Christ, through the good news, of which I became a ministrant, according to the gift of the grace of God that was given to me, according to the working of His power; to me — the less than the least of all the saints — was given this grace, among the nations to proclaim good news — the untraceable riches of the Christ, and to cause all to see what [is] the fellowship of the secret that hath been hid from the ages in God, who the all things did create by Jesus Christ, that there might be made known now to the principalities and the authorities in the heavenly [places], through the assembly, the manifold wisdom of God, according to a purpose of the ages, which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have the freedom and the access in confidence through the faith of him, wherefore, I ask [you] not to faint in my tribulations for you, which is your glory. (Eph 3:1-13 Young's Literal Translation)*

## ***Paul as Minister of the Mystery to the Gentiles (3:1-13)***

***Paul begins introduction to intercessory prayer ...***

<sup>1</sup> *For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you, the Gentiles,*

***... but his mention of his ministry to the Gentiles leads him to expound upon his position, forming a digression about the mystery entrusted to him.***

<sup>2</sup> *if, indeed, ye did hear of the stewardship [administration] of the grace of God which was given to me towards you,*

***Paul further describes this grace he was given as being a 'mystery' (a thing hidden until revealed by God)***

<sup>3</sup> *namely, that He made known the mystery*

***This mystery Paul is about to describe is something he has just mentioned and by reading it, the Gentiles should be able to perceive Paul's insight and understanding into the mystery***

*by revelation to me (as I wrote before briefly [lit., 'in a little, in a few'], <sup>4</sup> by which ye are able, when you read it, to understand my insight in the mystery of the Christ,*

***Paul explains this mystery has only now been revealed in the providence of God***

<sup>5</sup> *which was not made known in other generations to the sons of men, as it was now revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit),*

***Paul now explains the contents of the mystery***

<sup>6</sup> *that the Gentiles should be*

*joint – heirs*

*and joint – body*

*and joint – partakers of His promise in Jesus the Messiah through the gospel,*

***Paul explains he was a servant to declare the mystery***

<sup>7</sup> *of which I became a servant*

*according to the gift of the grace of God given to me,*

*according to the working of His power;*

***Paul explains he was given two tasks in this grace of the mystery***

<sup>8</sup> *this grace was given to me,*

*the less than the least of all the saints,*

***Paul uses two infinitives to describe the 'grace' God has given him:***

*to preach the unsearchable riches of the Christ among the Gentiles*

<sup>9</sup> *and to enlighten all as to what is the plan of the mystery*

*which was hidden from the beginning of the ages in God,*

*who created all things through Jesus Christ,*

<p>an <b>infinitive</b> is a verbal noun and therefore has features of both; it almost always begins with the word 'to'</p>
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***Why did the Lord give this grace of administering the mystery to Paul? The answer follows in what is called a 'hina' clause (ὅτι) which shows the purpose or result of something.***

<sup>10</sup> *in order that [hina] the untraceable wisdom of God might now be made known*

***To whom?***

*to the principalities*

*and to the authorities*

***Where are these principalities and authorities located?***

*in the heavenlies*

***What did the Lord use to make His wisdom known?***

*through the ecclesia*

***This was all done according to God's eternal plan:***

<sup>11</sup> *according to the eternal purpose*

*which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord*

<sup>12</sup> *in whom we have the freedom and the access in confidence through the faith of him,*

***Paul now gives the reason for his digression. Although he was a prisoner because of his actions on behalf of the Gentiles, Paul showed it was in the outworking of the larger, eternal plan of our Sovereign God to manifest His glory, and it was Paul's honor and privilege to be a part of this ministry of grace. His Gentile readers should therefore not be discouraged with his (and their) trials.***

<sup>13</sup> *therefore I ask you not to lose heart in my tribulations on behalf of you which is your glory.*

The essence of what Paul is saying is as follows:

*For this cause, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you, the Gentiles —*

*if, indeed, ye did hear of **the responsibility of managing the GRACE of God which was given to me, namely, that He made known the mystery that the Gentiles should be***

*joint – heirs*

*and joint – body*

*and joint – partakers*

*of His promise in Jesus the Messiah through the gospel;*

*this GRACE was given to me*

- *to preach the unsearchable riches of the Christ among the Gentiles*
- *and to enlighten all as to what is the plan of the mystery*

*in order that [hina] the untraceable wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and to the authorities in the heavenlies through the ecclesia.*

*Therefore I ask you not to lose heart in my tribulations on behalf of you which is your glory.*

**V 2 — of the dispensation —** τὴν οἰκονομίαν [tēn oikonomian] Translated variously as ‘dispensation’ (Geneva Bible, KJV, NKJV, YLT), ‘stewardship’ (RSV, NASV, ESV), ‘administration’ (NIV). This word is made up of two different words, although there is a difference of opinion as to what are those two words. Most of the Lexicons and commentators I have read agree it is formed from the words: ‘oikos’ = a house and ‘nomos’ = law. However a couple sources I have used believes this word to be formed from the words: ‘oikos’ = a house and ‘nemō’ = ‘manage, distribute, apportion,’ then ‘administer, rule.’ Regardless of the roots however, all are in agreement as to what this word meant during the times of the New Testament.

This word is used in various forms in the NT:

- **THE POSITION** — ‘an office involving management and organization: task, commission, responsibility,’ or ‘the work of that office involving management, the act of managing a household, a city or the world’ — οἰκονομία [oikonomia] — It is used in the LXX to mean ‘manage one’s affairs’ (Ps 112:5); in a historical book to mean ‘make an inventory’ (2 Macc 3:14). “*oikonomia, which suggests good order, is as much an art as a science, whether it means taking care of property or seeing to the relations between master and slaves. In the first century, oikonomia means the management of a household, the administration of a city, the running of the world, and, in a religious sense, the governing of the universe by God.*” [Spicq’s Theological Lexicon, vol 2, 568] *Figuratively (or as a metaphor) it is also used of the apostolic office in God’s redemptive work, ‘task, responsibility, trusteeship, stewardship,’ and is used in this manner in Col 1:25. It is also used in this manner of the Lord’s arrangements for man’s redemption, ‘plan, arrangement, purpose, dispensation,’ such as in Eph 1:9.*
- **THE PERSON** — ‘steward, household manager, city treasurer,’ then figuratively, ‘one entrusted by God with spiritual authority and administration’ — οἰκονόμος [oikonomos] — This person could have been free-born but was usually a freed-man or slave. “*It may then denote the head of a particular branch of a great house, e.g., the chief cook. As a loanword it can denote a city official (cf. Rom. 16:23). It may also be used for an estate manager or accountant as well as a housekeeper. In the rabbi Moses is God’s steward. In parables the loanword usually has the sense of treasurer.*” [Kittel-Bromiley, Theological Dictionary of the NT]

These words are used in the following manners (note: for its usage in 1 Tim 1:4, see the appendix):

**LITERAL USAGE OF THESE WORDS: HOUSEHOLD STEWARDS, TREASURERS** — It is used in the normal sense as we find in secular Greek several times in the NT. The first mention of this is in Luke:

*“And the Lord said, ‘Who then is that faithful and wise **steward** [οἰκονόμος, οικονος] whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?’” [Luke 12:42 NKJV; translated ‘steward’ (Geneva Bible, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NASV, YLT), ‘servant’ (Tyndale NT), ‘manager’ (NIV, ESV)]*

Luke uses these words again in a more prolonged passage:

*“He also said to His disciples: There was a certain rich man who had a **steward**, [οἰκονόμον, οικονον] and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your **stewardship**, [οἰκονομίας, οικονομίας] for you can no longer be **steward**,’ [οἰκονομεῖν, οικονομειν] Then the **steward** [οἰκονόμος, οικονος] said within himself, ‘What shall I do? For my master is taking the **stewardship** [οἰκονομίαν, **oikonomian, EXACT SAME WORD AS EPH 3:2**] away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the **stewardship**, [οἰκονομίας, οικονομίας] they may receive me into their houses.’ So he called every one of his master’s debtors to him, and said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ So he said to him, ‘Take your*

bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ So he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ So the master commended the unjust **steward** [οἰκονόμον, oikonomon] because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.” (Luke 16:1-8 NKJV; note Tyndale’s NT, Geneva Bible, KJV, NKJV, RSV, YLT translates it as ‘steward,’ the NIV, NASV and ESV translates the words as ‘manager, management’)

One is mentioned by Paul to have the secular position as ‘steward, overseer, treasurer’:

“Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the **treasurer** [οἰκονόμος, oikonomos] of the city, greets you, and Quartus, a brother.” [Rom 16:23 NKJV; this is translated by other versions as follows: ‘steward’ (Geneva, YLT), ‘chamberlain’ (KJV), ‘treasurer’ (NKJV, RSV, NASV, ESV), ‘city’s director of public works’ (NIV)]

The secular position is also mention in the book of Galatians by Paul, showing the responsibility given to some stewards over just not other slaves but even the master’s children who have not come of age:

“but is under guardians and **stewards** [οἰκονόμους, oikonomous] until the time appointed by the father.” (Gal 4:2 NKJV)

**USED OF THE LORD’S MANAGING OF THE AGES: DISPENSATIONS** — This same word is used of the Lord in His management of the ages. It is important to note when considering this usage, “A ‘dispensation’ is not a period or epoch (a common, but erroneous, use of the word), but a mode of dealing, an arrangement, or administration of affairs.” [Vine’s Expository Dictionary of NT Words, 174] “God has different ways of managing His program from age to age, and these different ‘stewardships’ Bible students sometimes call ‘dispensations’ (Eph. 1:9-10). God’s principles do not change, but His methods of dealing with mankind do change over the course of history. ‘Distinguish the ages,’ wrote Saint Augustine, ‘and the Scriptures harmonize.’” [Wiersbe, 27] “Greek writers about the time of the New Testament used oikonomia to describe the job of a household manager. In practice Greek slaves often managed the homes of wealthy landowners. Later this term came to describe the general work of administration. In the New Testament, and later, under the church father Ignatius, the word took on a theological twist. It came to mean the plan of God for redeeming people.” [Wayne Detzler, *New Testament Words in Today’s Language*] **All students of the Bible must recognize at least two different dispensations: the Old and New Covenants (or Testaments). The Easton Bible Dictionary defines three: the Patriarchal, the Mosaic or Jewish, and the Christian. Others list seven, corresponding to the seven days of the week.**

**dispensation** – (1) an act of dispensing, distribution; (2) something that is distributed or given out

**FIGURATIVE USAGE OF THESE WORDS: THE APOSTLES AND BELIEVERS AS STEWARDS** — The word is used by Paul in a theocratic sense both to the office (*stewardship, duty, responsibility, commission*) entrusted to him by God of proclaiming the blessings of the gospel, and to the actual work of that office. This is also applied to all believers.

“For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a **stewardship** [οἰκονομίαν, oikonomian].” (1Cor 9:17 NKJV) I like the ESV’s addition of ‘still entrusted’ in their translation: “For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a **stewardship**.” (1Cor 9:17 ESV)

“of which I became a minister according to the **stewardship** [οἰκονομίαν, oikonomian] from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God” (Col 1:25 NKJV)

“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and **stewards** [οἰκονόμους, oikonomous] of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in **stewards** [οἰκονόμοις, oikonomois] that one be found faithful.” (1Cor 4:1,2 NKJV)

“For a bishop must be blameless, as a **steward** [οἰκονόμον, oikonomon] of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money” (Titus 1:7 NKJV)

“As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good **stewards** [οἰκονόμοι, oikonomoi] of the manifold grace of God.” (1 Pet 4:10 NKJV)

“Every believer is a steward of the calling, spiritual gifts, opportunities, skills, knowledge, and every other blessing he has from the Lord. Everything we have belongs to the Lord, and we are therefore entrusted as stewards to manage our lives and everything we possess in behalf of the One to whom they belong. We are faithful stewards when we use what we have to minister to those within the family of God and witness to those who are without. ‘As each one has received a special gift,’ Peter admonishes us, ‘employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God’ (1 Pet. 4:10).” [MacArthur, 89]

**Lessons we can glean from the use of these words:**

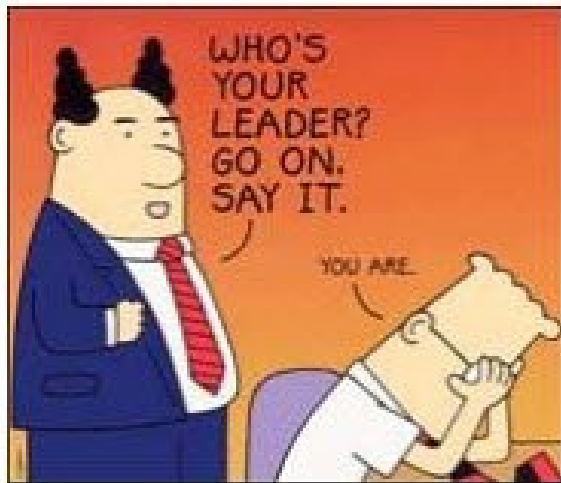
- **descriptive terms used: management, oversight, administration, obligation, responsibility** — therefore we have a life-long task
- **authority** — I like the emphasis John Gill brings forth: “Now the apostle had a dispensation to preach this Gospel committed to him; he acted by authority, and as a steward of the mysteries of God; and which he faithfully dispensed to the family of Christ, who appointed him to this service.” [Gill, 79] **We go out in His authority!**



- **the property involved did not belong to the steward but it all belonged to another** — “oikonomia (stewardship) primarily referred to the management of a household, business, or other concern on behalf of someone else. *A steward was responsible for taking care of that which belonged to someone else.* He supervised such things as buying, selling, bookkeeping, planting, harvesting, storing, the preparation of meals, the assignment of duties to slaves, and whatever else needed to be done.” [MacArthur, 89] “So when St. Paul asks: ‘Let people think of us as servants of Christ and stewards [oikonomous] of the mysteries of God’ (1 Cor 4:1; cf. 9:17), or when he stipulates that ‘the episkopos [overseer, bishop] must be blameless as God’s steward’ (oikonomon, Titus 1:7), he positions this post precisely: having governmental authority over subordinates, but more importantly being itself subordinate to God. *No matter how extensive the powers of the oikonomoï, they are not the owners of the treasures of truth and grace that are entrusted to them; as they administer these treasures they must remain aware of their dependency and of the accounting that they will have to give. Hence the obligation to be faithful.*” [Spicq’s Theological Lexicon, vol 2, 573f]

- **fully accountable to his master and had to render an account when called upon** — “*The apostle himself is an oikonomos in 1 Cor. 4:1: as a minister of Christ he is entrusted with the treasures of the gospel, and the first requirement is trustworthiness. Tit. 1:7 describes the bishop as God’s steward, and 1 Pet. 4:10 calls on every Christian, as a recipient of a gift, to be a good steward of God’s varied grace.*” [Kittel-Bromiley, Theological Dictionary of the NT] “*For the oikonomos is chosen for his abilities to carry out this function: hardworking, zealous, competent, circumspect. ‘What is required of stewards is that they be found faithful,’ worthy of the master’s confidence.*” [Spicq’s Theological Lexicon, vol 2, 568] It must be noted the metaphor of a steward breaks down at this point: *God did not choose us and save us for anything He saw in us!*

## *What kind of stewards are we?*



**USAGE IN THE BOOK OF EPHESIANS** — Our words are used three times in the book of Ephesians:

*‘that in the **dispensation** [οἰκονομίαν, oikonomian] of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth — in Him’ (Eph 1:10) TDNT: the ‘divine plan’ of salvation, its ‘order and administration’*

*‘and to make all see what is the **[stewardship]** [οἰκονομία, oikonomia] of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ’ (Eph 3:9) Friberg Lexicon: God’s arrangement for mankind’s redemption – ‘plan, arrangement, purpose;’ TDNT: the ‘divine plan’ of salvation, its ‘order and administration’*

This brings us to today’s verse:

*‘if indeed you have heard of the **dispensation** [οἰκονομίαν, oikonomian] of the grace of God which was given to me for you’ (Eph 3:2)*

This could be understood as either Paul’s office or the work of the office:

**‘MANAGEMENT’** — **‘If you have heard, as I assume you have, of the responsibility of administering the grace of God which was given to me for you Gentiles’** — *“Paul refers to it as an ‘administration’ of divine grace. The term is usually equivalent to stewardship or task (Col 1:25). Here and in Ephesians 1:9, however, it’s to be interpreted rather as the implementation of a strategy.”* [Wood, Ephesians on CD]

**‘MANAGERIAL POSITION, THE OFFICE OF MANAGER’** — **‘If you have heard, as I assume you have, of the commission of the grace of God which was given to me for you Gentiles’** — Support for this might be found in

1 Cor 9:17:

*“For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.”* (1 Cor 9:17 ESV)

Another supporting verse is 1 Cor 4:1:

*“Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.”* (1 Cor 4:1 KJV)

“‘Dispensation’ means here a divine order or command, or, as it is generally expressed, a *commission*.” [Calvin, 247]  
“[I]t could have the connotation of the office of an administrator or the work of the administrator. Here it seems the emphasis is upon the office of an administrator: the Ephesians had heard of Paul’s position of an administrator.” [Hoehner, 422] “The expression, *dispensation of the grace given unto me*, is the designation of his office. It was an οἰκονομία [oikonomia], a ‘stewardship.’” [Hodge, 85]

## APPENDIX A — ‘STEWARDSHIP’ IN 1 TIM 1:4

While preparing for this lesson I ran across an odd usage which deserves some attention, 1 Tim 1:4:

*“... nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly **edification** which is in faith.”* (1Tim 1:4 NKJV)

What I found interesting is that the Greek word translated ‘edification’ is our word for ‘*stewardship, dispensation*.’ This is how the ESV translates this verse:

*“... nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the **stewardship** [οἰκονομίαν, oikonomia] from God that is by faith.”* (1Tim 1:4 ESV)

Some believe this to have the sense of ‘*divine training*’ and uses the usage later in some of the Church Fathers’ writings to support their stand:

“False teachers are said to promote speculations rather than godly ‘instruction, training’; note this sense is unique to the NT but found in the church fathers; e.g., Clement of Alexandria Paedagogus 1.8.64.3” [Theological Dictionary of the NT]

I believe Thayer’s Lexicon has a better explanation; the reason I like this explanation is because it keeps with the normal usage of the word within the NT:

*“‘which furnish matter for disputes rather than the (knowledge of the) dispensation of the things by which God has provided for and prepared salvation, which salvation must be embraced by faith’”* [Thayer’s Lexicon]

Therefore Paul would be saying to Timothy “*not to give heed to those things which furnish matter for disputes rather than the knowledge of the dispensation of the things by which God has provided for and prepared salvation, which salvation must be embraced by faith.*” Whether this is the exact point Paul was making to Timothy or not, I found the usage of our word ‘stewardship’ very unusual in this verse.