"The mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 6:19).

"I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

"...in whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

We have remarked that the mystery of the gospel relates to the deep and hidden counsels of God before creation. If we want to know what those counsels were, we have that given to us mainly in this letter to the Ephesians. There are three aspects of this whole counsel of God, or of this mystery of the gospel. In dealing with it we are, of course, touching perhaps the most controversial matter that has ever come under the discussion of the Church and probably the most difficult thing that has to be resolved; indeed, I do not think that it can be resolved. We have simply to accept statements of fact. You will see what I mean as we go on.

The Mystery of the Eternal Counsels

There are three aspects of this whole counsel of God, or of that which is called the mystery of the gospel, the mystery or the secret of the good news. Now, a secret is not a thing which lies on the surface; you have to get deeper down to find a secret. It means that there is something here in the good news of God that has a very deep meaning. If God has a secret, you may be sure that it is not some trifling matter. No, it is something tremendous; and the first aspect of this mystery, or secret, or whole counsel of God, is the mystery of the eternal counsels. What are those counsels? We must, of course, speak after the manner of men; but we must not try to bring such things within the limits of our understanding and knowledge. We do not know exactly how it happened, but what we do know as a fact is this, that before the world was, God is represented as taking counsel with Himself, projecting an intention - a great, comprehensive intention - which is called here 'the purpose', 'the eternal purpose'; a purpose, an intention, which has a centre and a circumference with a good many aspects of outworking and realization.

The centre was God's Son, known to us as the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the pivot; that in the fullness of the times God should "sum up all things in Christ" (Eph. 1:10). That is very comprehensive, for if you have "all things", you have all; you cannot add to that. "To sum up all things in Christ". That is the heart of the purpose and of the counsel.

But then there is the marvellous statement - words around which there is so much controversy - that He saw us, He had us in His eye. When I say 'us' I refer to an elect company which at a certain time, in a certain dispensation in the history of this world, would be gathered out of the nations; and He foresaw every one of them. Now this is the mystery of the gospel, and it is beyond us. Imagination reels here; the statement seems almost fantastic. If the word means anything at all, those concerned were individually foreseen, foreknown and chosen in Christ, and foreordained and predestinated. Those are words you cannot overcome; every member of that elect body was foreknown, every member was predestinated. Now listen: predestination was not to salvation or otherwise - that is where so much interpretation has gone wrong. Predestination has to do with specific purpose, not with salvation. It is according to His purpose in Christ Jesus that we were foreknown and foreordained "to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). We were predestinated with a purpose, and - marvellous to relate! - given to Christ. It is as though, before ever we had a being, before the creation, the Father had the Son and brought each one of us and gave us to the Son as His. Does that sound extravagant? Well, what is the meaning of the Scripture? Have you read thoughtfully through the seventeenth chapter of John? What is the thing which is constantly recurring in that chapter? Repeatedly we read there of "those whom thou hast given me". And in another place He has said, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me" (John 6:37). It is tremendous in its implication. Those are the eternal counsels, this is the mystery of the gospel; and although that mystery, that secret, is said to be disclosed now, who of us has got to the bottom of it yet? I doubt whether any of us will get to the bottom of it in this life, but we have at any rate got it opened up. But this mystery of the gospel is so boundless, so unfathomable. Here are statements of fact concerning a people given to Christ in God's foreknowledge. I know, of course, your mental problem about election, but wait a minute; let us begin there, and we will come to the other in a minute.

That, then, is the first thing about the mystery, the wonder, of the gospel, the secret of God which was hidden from ages and generations but now made known (Col. 1:26). I say, that startles our imagination, but there it is; and we can do no more than point it out.
The Mystery of the Gospel

The Proclamation of the Mystery

(a) Essential, Despite Divine Foreordaining

The second thing about it is the proclaiming of it. "I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God". And here in the end of this letter Paul is asking for prayer from believers that he may be able to open his mouth to utter this mystery, that he may have boldness to speak it (Eph. 6:19); and does it not want boldness to say things like that! See what such preaching makes of Jesus Christ, see where it puts Him; all things summed up in Christ! Go out and say that to Mohammedans and see what they will have to say to you! Well, you want boldness to declare that to those who have not seen. However, the Apostle is concerned with the proclamation of the whole counsel, the mystery of God.

That proclamation brings us up against another matter. If eternal counsel is all this - foreseen, predestinated, given - then why proclaim the gospel? Surely it must happen if God has decided upon it! If it is all settled like that and they are given, why proclaim? Immediately you introduce the question of man’s responsibility, and that seems to be a contradiction. That is the great theological trouble; but all I am going to say about that is this, that responsibility in this matter of proclaiming does not undercut what we have just been saying about predestination. It does not mean for one moment that in putting before people an option you rule out predestination. No, you are put into the position of responsibility for declaring the whole counsel of God, and people are put into a responsible position by hearing it. The one truth does not neutralize the other.

It is the same in prayer. If God knows what He is going to do, why pray? Will it make any difference? But we cannot argue like that. We are told we have to pray, that is all. The responsibility comes back on us, although there is all this other side concerning the Divine counsels.

(b) A Full Gospel Essential to Full Growth

Then - and I want to say this very precisely - the full counsel of God is the only safe thing. I wonder if a very poor spiritual condition in converts, in Christianity, is not due to very inadequate preaching. Men are afraid to go too far, and they say, ‘Preach the simple gospel of sins forgiven and judgment past and hope of heaven’ - making the individual in question the object of it all instead of God’s eternal counsels. Yes, the poor state amongst Christians is due to their not having been taught the whole counsel of God at the beginning. I do not believe that it is necessary to reserve the whole counsel until they reach some stage along the road where they can accept it. Why should we not go and declare to unsaved men that God from all eternity had them in view and has now come to tell them so, and to tell them why He had them in view, and what the great goal of it all is - His Son Jesus Christ? I think we should get better converts and a far better state in the Church. I believe that people should be very much better born than they are. Many are very poorly born, and their infancy is far, far too much extended in time. Well, Paul said to the Ephesians, “I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God”; and that was before he wrote his letter to them. Yes, a full counsel is the only safe thing. I must leave that there, we have a long way to go.

(c) The Message Essentially Spiritual and Heavenly

The next thing about this proclamation is that it must ever be kept in mind and in view that the gospel is an essentially spiritual and heavenly thing. When Paul speaks about the mystery of the gospel he does so in relation to all that he has been saying about "in the heavenlies in Christ". "The heavenlies" is not merely a matter of location, it is the nature of things. Again, the trouble with ninety-nine out of every hundred Christians is that they are so earthly in their Christianity, so earthbound, and the gospel has become after all such a matter of temporalities - how it affects things here in time, and the temporal and material outworkings of Christianity. As we were saying in our previous meditation, the real measure of Christianity is the measure of spirituality, and that means the measure in which the Lord Who is in heaven is known and manifested in us here. Everything takes its rise from a Christ ascended to glory outside of this world. While He was here, He was limited - limited by everything, and most of all limited in the apprehension of those in closest association with Him. When He went to heaven and the Spirit came, they received marvellous enlargement of apprehension of Christ. It was no longer an earthly one, a temporal one. It had to be a spiritual one because He was outside of this world, He could not be seen with natural eyes; in no way was it possible to have any link or communication with Him other than by the Holy Spirit. It is a very wonderful statement that Peter makes in his letter - "whom not having seen ye love; on whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice greatly with joy unspeakable and full of glory" (1 Pet. 1:8). You do not see Him, yet He is most real to you. How does that come about? Because you went to Jerusalem or Capernaum and had an interview with Him? Not at all, you do not
know Him in that way; your knowledge of Him is entirely spiritual. That may be true, of course, right at the beginning of the Christian life, but the principle of spirituality and heaviness ought to mean more and more to us as we go on, as Paul wrote to the Colossians - "If then ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are upon the earth. For ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall be manifested, then shall ye also with him be manifested in glory" (Col. 3:1-4).

And the need today of proclaiming the whole counsel of God lies firstly in the direction of the Lord's own people. They must know the whole counsel of God; they ought to have known it at the beginning. And then beyond them, the whole counsel of God must reach to the unsaved. But what do we find? We find this sad state in the Church, and therefore the Church cannot lift the unsaved higher than its own level. We find the Church earthbound, tied up with things here in all sorts of ways, with vision purely earthly, on this low level. The great heavenly vision of that eternal purpose of God concerning His Son is not the thing which the Church has seen and is seeing and is therefore ministering. No, the Church has to be saved from its own earthly condition and to come to the original position of the Church, a purely spiritual and heavenly thing. The whole ecclesiastical system proves the truth of this. What a thing of earth the Church has become in respect of its ecclesiastical architecture, its buildings! And that is pointed to as evidence that the church is something! The more ornate, elaborate, impressive, the building, the greater evidence that the church is something! But that is purely earthly, it is not a bit necessary to real spiritual life and effectiveness. Indeed, very often the real spirituality is found in places very different, or in no place at all - the Lord's people gathered to Him under an opened heaven. That is where the testimony is.

(d) Preaching Directed by the Holy Spirit

Then in this proclamation, the preaching must be directed or precipitated by the Holy Spirit. Why? For this very reason - and it is a principle that is borne out and shown us clearly in the book of the Acts - that only the Holy Spirit has the Divine knowledge as to where there are those given to Christ who are ready to come to Him. You cannot just go out willy-nilly and be sure of results. We have cited Paul in this matter and here is the principle stated. They were "forbidden of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia, and they assayed to go into Bithynia; and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not" (Acts 16:6-7). Paul might go to Bithynia and Asia at another time, but not then. The Holy Spirit is in charge. "Forbidden of the Holy Spirit... the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not". Why? - that is for the sovereignty of God. When Paul came to Corinth, he was up against a terrific situation and the Lord the Spirit said to him, "Be not afraid... I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:9,10). "I have", not 'I am going to have'. Do you see the working of eternal counsels and foreknowledge?

The whole book of Acts is constructed upon that principle. There is a lonely man crossing a desert. God in heaven has seen him and known that he is ready for the gospel, and sends Philip to make contact with him. "Go near, and join thyself to this chariot". The issue is straightforward immediately (Acts 8:26-40). Then away up in Caesarea there is a man praying; he is evidently asking the Lord to lead him on, to show him all His will. He is living up to the light he has, but he wants more. The Lord in heaven is taking notice of him. To Peter, away at Joppa, the Lord says, 'Go, make contact with that man who is ready' (Acts 10). This is the sovereignty of the Spirit in relation to eternal counsels and foreknowledge. The point is that the Holy Spirit must precipitate the proclamation and govern it, or we waste a lot of time and effort. You cannot do this sort of thing by having committees and drawing up programmes. You must be a Holy-Spirit-governed instrument for this work. "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). It is like that all the way along. It must be a matter of the Holy Spirit in charge of things; the proclamation must be entirely governed by Him like that, and precipitated by Him.

The Responsibility of the Hearers

Yes, but then, you see, we come to this next thing - the responsibility of the hearers. In the mental realm this is another problem in the light of what we have been saying. Never mind, put that aside. The responsibility of the hearers. First of all, look at it in this way - the sovereignty of God which lies behind the very fact that the message has come across your path. It may be at work here at this very moment. Yes, away back there in those eternal counsels (this is no stretching of imagination) God saw you, and He said, 'I want that person for My full thought concerning My Son'; and here you are being told it and all the eternal counsels of God may sovereignly be behind your receiving this message. But the point is this, you are here where the message is being proclaimed. Do you just happen to be here? God is consistent, and if He decides upon a thing in His counsels He works to it and there it is. You say it just happens; but there it is - we are here, and it is that which begins our responsibility. Responsibility begins when God sovereignly puts His plan into operation and brings it across our path.
But you are saying, 'Man has a free will and he can refuse in spite of God's predestinating'. That is where the clash comes. Yes, he can; but we are not talking about salvation at this moment, we are talking about the purpose of our salvation. Oh yes, we can refuse our salvation, and the clash is there between God's foreknowing and predestinating, and our free will; we cannot resolve that. But here is the fact - that at this very moment God is telling us that we were called with a holy calling, that there is a tremendous thing bound up with our being saved. We can refuse the Lord what He intended; we can forfeit that which He had in view. You cannot reconcile these two things, but there they are, and there is a responsibility laid upon us. That is where that other side of the New Testament comes in, all the time warning, warning - "if", "if", "if" - and it is said every time to people who are already saved. There is a mighty 'if' constantly being pressed upon them; and are you going to say, as some, that you never know whether you are saved till you get to heaven? I am not going to accept that; I know I am saved. It is not a question that if you do something, you will be saved; and, after you are saved, if only you do something else you will keep your salvation. The 'ifs' relate to this purpose of your salvation, and you can miss that. That is where responsibility comes in on the side of the hearers. It is a mystery, true; but it is a fact.

But what does this amount to? what are we saying? Well, here you are; you believe in the Lord Jesus and believe you have eternal life; you are saved. But then the Lord comes along to you in His sovereignty and shows you that there is an 'unto' as well as a 'from'. It is a great thing to be saved from hell, from sin, from Satan, but now the Lord is saying that you were saved unto something; and if there is a lot from which to be saved, there is infinitely more unto which to be saved. Oh, it is the mighty 'unto' that governs this mystery of God. You see, the 'from' is incidental, the 'unto' is eternal. The mystery of God, our salvation, does not date back simply to when sin entered, the beginning was not the fall of man. Salvation overlaps that point and goes back to purpose - all these counsels of the Godhead before the creation and therefore before the fall. That is the object in view in the end, and God is working to that. He would have worked straight on to it but man sinned and fell. Now God must make a dip in His course and reach down with salvation to bring back to His original intention. Salvation is in relation to the eternal purpose which was before the fall. It is 'unto' more than it is 'from'. 'From', I say again, is incidental - terribly, tragically incidental, but incidental; it is not the eternal. It is the 'unto' that is governing everything, that purpose of God. Of course, in the 'from', God clothed Himself with extra glory. In the letter to the Ephesians, we have the two things - "that we should be to the praise of his glory" (1:12), that is one thing; "the glory of his grace" (1:6) is another thing. The glory of His grace is the extra that God gets when Satan interferes and man goes wrong. God is never beaten by wrong, He always gets more. So through grace, He adds to His glory.

But, mark you, that was not His intention in the beginning. I have had it said to me that God was glad when man sinned and fell, because it gave Him the chance He wanted of showing He was a gracious God. I repudiate that. No, not at all! Nevertheless, God cannot be defeated, and interference with His purpose cannot leave Him just where He was - He will get more every time. It will be the interferer who loses, and man's sin has only made possible extra glory to God along the line of grace; but it was not His intention, it was His triumph. And He is doing that with us all the way along; He is making good our need of grace in order to get extra glory to Himself. Through grace, He is getting glory where we are concerned.

God's Need on Earth of a Representation of His Full Counsel

(a) Experimental, not Theoretical

Now, God has set His heart upon having His whole counsel represented - that is the real heart of these meditations. God must have that whole counsel found in representation or He is defeated, and so He sets to work to bring those who will come, who will pay the price, into this position which, in the first place, satisfies Him, and in the second place, serves Him in that purpose; and a basic essential is a passion in our hearts for God's fullest thought. If He is going to lead us into it, He must have that response in us for His own satisfaction. Now in His dealings with us in this connection, He may lead us by permissive ways - ways, that is, which are less than His ultimate and full thought, and yet, in His permissive will, He will lead us by those ways. We find that in the sovereign government of our life we are led into something that is not wholly God's thought. That is true.

If you will allow a personal testimony, I can say with the utmost confidence that the years I spent as a denominational minister were the sovereign permissive will of God. It was right for me to be there at that time, although, as I came to see later, that realm of things was not God's full and final thought for me. But my coming to that fuller thought had to be on the basis of experience and not of theory. In that narrower realm I learned something of weakness and limitation and disappointment, both in myself and in the sphere in which I moved,
which made me reach out for something better - I knew not what, and I would not have sought it but for the experience of disillusionment in the lesser realm. It was the lesser thing that made me cry out for an opened heaven, and for an order of things where I would not have to preach so many times a week simply because it was required of me as a duty, with all the terrible labour of trying to work up something to preach about - an order of things where ministry would be by revelation out from heaven, and only as and when the Holy Spirit gave and required it. Oh, the heart cry for deliverance from that old realm and order! And God in His mercy brought me through to something else on an experimental basis. Yes, God, in His sovereign permissive will, leads us in certain ways which are not His full thought at all in order to make our ultimate position to be based upon a real spiritual experience, and not upon a doctrine or a theory that we have taken on or that has been imposed on us. There are multitudes of Christians in doctrinal positions today which they know nothing about experimentally. They have accepted a tradition, a system of teaching; they are in it, they believe in it, but they know nothing about it in their own experience. That is not God's way.

The point for the moment is that we must be very careful that we do not take God's permissive will as His ultimate will. We must not say, 'The Lord led me into this, therefore I must stay and I must never move'. Be careful; you must always give God a free hand. He will not explain Himself at the time; He will seem to be contradicting Himself sometimes; you will understand later on. The thing is, never fix anything for God. If there is one thing that is made clear in the book of the Acts, it is this - God is not going to be tied up to men's ideas as to what He ought to do. That sheet let down from heaven in Peter's vision is a declaration that in heaven things exist which men will not allow here. Heaven's view is very different. Peter is going to argue this thing out with the Lord: "Not so, Lord". He might have added, 'and I can give Scripture for it! Lord, look at Lev. 11'. And the Lord makes it perfectly clear that He is not going to have anything of that. Sovereignty demands a clear road. God is always doing that sort of thing, and He demands that we shall be in such a position that He can do as He likes with us and we will not argue. That is the only way to fullness. If you are tied by your tradition, by your upbringing, by the thing that may have been of the Lord at one time, if you are tied with it and you say of it, 'as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be', you cut clean across the path of the Spirit of fullness. It is only as we are open to the Lord without prejudice, without fixity, stretched right out to the Lord, only so shall we come into the full counsel of God.

(b) The Purpose, Not Self, Dominant

You see the real starting point - the point which is the guarantee of fullness - is this, that everything is governed by God's purpose and God's will, and not by our need or our desire. We are called unto His eternal glory, we are called according to His purpose. If we are going to limit the gospel of salvation to just the meeting of our need, we are going to limit things. The full thing is not just to be saved from a fall, it is to be saved back to that which we missed in the fall - and that is not just a life marked by a certain kind of behaviour, but a mighty purpose of God. It is when we see that, and only as that becomes a dominant thing - God's will, God's purpose: not even my need, and certainly not my desire - only then are we on the highway to God's fullness; and you will find, if you are going to be entrusted with the fellowship of the mystery, that will be the way the Lord will take you. You will constantly be coming up against this. We have to be governed by eternal purpose, not by what we think necessary, not by what we would like, even for the Lord.

This mystery of the gospel - we realise even now how it defeats every attempt to explain it; but if we cannot grasp the terms, that is, if it does defeat our minds, let us open our hearts to the Lord on this simple but very sound basis - 'Lord, there is something very great in Thy thought; I see it is something infinitely more than that I should be saved. I do not grasp it, I cannot explain or understand it: but it is something very great to which Thou hast saved me and called me in Christ; and I want it, and I commit myself to Thee for all that. I trust Thy grace in whatever it may cost; I trust Thy power to perfect that which concerneth me, to work it all out; I commit myself to Thee for all Thy will, for all Thy purpose, for the whole counsel, for all that is so far beyond my apprehension; Lord, work in me that which is well-pleasing in Thy sight'.

The Mystery of the Gospel