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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
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1 Corinthians 2 v 7

But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden
wisdom, which God ordained before the world
unto our glory

We shall need eternity to explore the infinite depths of wisdom and prudence that God has put in the Lord Jesus and revealed by the Gospel. It is but the merest inkling, comparatively, that we have of the love of God in Christ, and the more we get from the Spirit of the gospel, the humbler we shall be, the more hungry we shall be, and the more earnestly we shall be panting for God as a thirsty land. This wisdom is Christ; this hidden wisdom is Christ. Hidden from the eyes of man, as a sinner; revealed to the eyes that God gives. The seeing eye is the gift of God. The speaking of the wisdom is the preaching of it. Paul put aside the natural ability and gift which he had and with which he might have enticed many people to a general profession of the gospel, and determined, having some experience of it, to know nothing in his ministry among men, save the preaching of this mystery, which is Christ and Him crucified. A self-denial this, that no man today can, comparatively at any rate, claim. The speaking of this in the ministry is by the unction and particular oil, fresh oil, which from time to time anoints a minister. He must first of all receive for himself this mystery, which means that he must first of all be a sinner. "A sinner is a sacred thing, the Holy Ghost has made him so" And, being such a sinner, he receives by the Holy Ghost the forgiveness of sins which comes from the Lord Jesus and Him crucified. As many of us as are to be in heaven shall know painfully what it is to deserve hell. You may shrink from the pain of it, but it will be there in your hearts, those of you who are going to heaven. You must know first of all before you get there that you deserve hell. You will never leave off feeling that as long as you are in this life, but the antidote, the

remedy, the gospel, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, think of it. God has appointed the ministry; we speak, and it is a great thing to speak for God. If I had not a hope in my heart that He has appointed me to preach the gospel, as I feel now, I could not dare to occupy this pulpit. There is plenty of preaching; there always has been plenty of preaching. How much anointed preaching there has been in the world and is today, the Lord knows. It is not uttering doctrine, though doctrine must be preached. It is not talking experience, though experience must be known and felt. You will preach doctrine, if called to preach; you will preach experience, if called to preach, but it is not simply uttering words about these two great branches of vital religion. It is a mystery, a secret thing. The simplest words that an anointed minister utters may be the very words that God uses to quicken the dead, to deliver those in bondage and to reveal the Person and the work and the glory of Christ. And whenever there is such speaking as Paul here names, there will be something of this blessed mystery of God. Mystery; a mystery is a covered thing which may be uncovered; it is not an unknowable thing. Only to have it opened you must have the gift to you of the Holy Ghost. Sin is a mystery; it is not known to be a mystery until men are convinced by the Spirit. Christ is a mystery; a divine Person taking into union with Himself our nature, becoming, not two Persons, but one Person with two natures. More correctly perhaps a divine Person taking up into union, never to be dissolved, with Himself the seed of Abraham; one Person. I believe that that is a remarkable passage in Isaiah - "Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given and His name", - not the name of the Son exclusively, not the name of the child exclusively, but the two have this one name - "shall be called Wonderful". Wonderful it is indeed. This is the mystery of God, Jesus Christ, and speaking of it Paul calls it a hidden wisdom. And in the Ephesians he speaks of the wisdom of God, the prudence of God, and the wisdom and the prudence of God are in this mystery; hidden wisdom, Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God in devising salvation; the wisdom of God in giving sinners to Christ, in giving Christ to sinners. The wisdom of God in ordaining that, in the given time, the Son of God should become incarnate, as in the Galatians we

are told - when the fulness of time was come God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, that He might redeem us, redeem sinners, dying for them. And this was ordained of God, eternally ordained of God, to be made manifest in time. It was ordained before the world unto our glory. Peter has a word of this kind - "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation, received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb slain before the foundation of the world." And this is unto our glory. No flesh shall glory in God's presence, but redeemed, quickened, converted sinners are for the glory of God, and they set forth that glory in their persons, in their experiences, in their being redeemed from this present world, and living unto God, in the power of the Spirit.

Now let us look a little, as enabled, at the experimental outcome of this beautiful word which is this, that sinners have their hearts opened, as Lydia, to receive the gospel. That seller of purple heard the Apostle speaking of God, and as He spoke her heart was opened to receive what he said. The difference between Lydia and the men of Athens, and other who called Paul a babbler and a man who turned the world upside down, was just this - not that her disposition was gracious naturally, and theirs ungracious, but that she, a sinful woman, had a new heart given to her, and a new spirit and an ear to hear what the Spirit said. Now that will give us a key to some experience. There was a time when we did not want the gospel was there not. Why, and how came the day when we did want it and want it still? By the Holy Ghost. The want of the gospel is likened in the scripture to hunger and thirst. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness". And this means that a new born person can never be put off with any human remedy, with any human device of salvation, but must have, seeks to have, and waits for, God's great salvation. Such a person can sometimes say honestly to God - "As the hart panteth after the waterbrooks, so panteth my soul after Thee O God". Now if you come to yourself, if you go to your room or bedroom or sitting

room or your office, can you say here at times, my soul speaks or tries to speak to God, and I say to Him - Lord, I can never be satisfied until I know that Thou hast blessed me with salvation. Lord, I have a wicked heart; I am a poor ignorant sinner; I am very disposed to turn away from Thee, but I do want Thee. There is an amazing simplicity in the prayers of gracious people. No big words of ready talkers, but just the simple, outspoken desires of the heart. Prayer is asking for the things you feel your need of. Well now that is a great point; I am sure some of you like points in religion, clear points; I do. And this is one of them, real prayer squeezed out of a felt necessity rising freely by the operation of the Spirit which may not be recognised at the moment; prayer, wafted to heaven by the breath of the Spirit, entering the ears of the Lord God of Sabaoth through the merits of Christ, to be returned to the soul in sweet answers. Then perhaps God uses a minister, and the minister speaks; it is called preaching, but here it is called speaking, a more homely word. We speak to poor sinners the wisdom of God in a mystery. How can I know it then? By God taking off the cover, opening to you what is meant by the mystery of God, the hidden wisdom of God, and the Spirit as it were says, this mystery, this hidden wisdom, is Jesus Christ; is His suffering, His death. And now says the sinner, what I want to know is did He die for me. A plain point; did He die for me. And it may be as if the Holy Spirit should say in a plain English word, yes, when he bears His witness with your spirit, or when, without a word, you may feel suddenly that your sins are removed from you, that your conscience is easy, that your soul is melted into a sweet sorrow, raised up into a spiritual surprise that such a word, such a salvation, and such goodness should come to such a sinner. I know it is difficult to pray sometimes. It is difficult on several grounds, one of which is ignorance. We know not what we should pray for as we ought. Another is the sense of sin that depresses the soul, but there is more in Christ's gospel to encourage than there can be in sin to discourage, much more, infinitely more. O I wish we could believe this. Yes, dear fellow sinners, if we could but believe this, it is laying hold of eternal life, laying hold of Christ, and in this there is

a good measure of liberty, when sinners have liberty to pray, call on God's Holy Name, and get near to Him. We speak this wisdom of God, the wisdom and prudence of God manifested in blessing His church with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ, and this was before the world began. The mystery lies in the death of Christ very very largely. The mystery of redemption is an infinite thing. O hell would swallow us up, all of us, but for the death of Christ. That death was the death of deaths; that death removed all the sin away from the church that she had ever been guilty of; that death becomes the plea and the ground of a sinner's life and hope. His life is here; his petitions are here; his hope is here and everything that is good he derives from the death of Christ and he wonders at the mystery of the wisdom, the wisdom of God, whereby He devised that scheme of redemption that should honour the perfection of Jehovah and make Jehovah's justice, an attribute terrible to a sinner, justice, consistent with salvation. When you reflect, as you do of course from time to time through grace, on your sinfulness, then you are apt, by temptation and reasoning and setting up your sins before God, to think and to conclude that whoever may have mercy, mercy will never reach you. But this is a wonder, one of the greatest words in the Bible, if I may say, one of the picked words of the Bible - a just God and a Saviour - and this comes out of the hidden wisdom, the mystery of Christ. A just God and a Saviour; and this again you will find to be in that passage you have in the second Epistle of the Corinthians - "He" the Father of the Lord Jesus "hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." If ever that gets hold of you, if ever that is set before you as in a glass, and you look into it, you will say, O this is a mystery of wisdom; who but God could have devised it, that I, a black piece of hell, should be made a pure person, should be made fit for heaven; that Christ, a pure, holy, undefiled Person, should have my black sins imputed to Him, and the curse due to them should fall into His soul. You will admire God's wisdom then. "We all with open face" - that is to say, in that passage the veil removed from the heart - "We all with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord

are changed into the same image from glory to glory" which is being made the righteousness of God in Christ. Not a reformed person, no, but a changed sinner. Rags, filthy rags, taken from him and a robe, pure, infinite, clear and beautiful as God's light, as light itself, imputed. Ah it is a mystery indeed how God can be honoured in saving a wretch, passing devils and millions of men by and taking hold of you. You will say "Why me, O blessed God, why me". We speak this wisdom. If God, as I trust, has called me to preach, I have nothing to say today more than this which I have been trying to speak about for many years, that God has manifested His wisdom and His goodness and His love, and His salvation in the Lord Jesus and here He speaks of it as the wisdom of God in a mystery. This will cry down and trample under foot all the pride of man, all their poor intellect and the longest stretch of their understanding, and bring them to be fools. As it is written "If any man will be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise."

"Which God ordained". No chance; the goddess contingency has no place in the gospel. Ordained before the world, that took place in the world and does take place in the world still, and will take place in the world to the end of the world. "Ordained for our glory" What belongs to you, what belongs to me naturally? Shame; shame, not, blessed be God, not shame before and among men, for ungodly practices, but the shame of disobedience, the shame of breaking the law, the shame of doubting God in Eden, the shame of doing directly what He forbid, that is the shame, the shame of sin. O what shame. Have not some of us covered our faces, have not our faces been suffused with shame? You could face your fellows, but you could not lift your face up to God sometimes. Ezra had this experience. "We are before Thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before Thee because of this". What belongs to a chosen vessel of mercy, to a subject of grace: What belongs to one whom God has called and instructed and blessed with the gospel? Glory; not the glory of good works, though he is ordained to them, begotten unto good works, but not that, that glory will be disowned by all who have it, but the glory of this wisdom, the glory of the prudence

of God in giving to us Jesus Christ; in giving Him to be a mediator between us and God. "There is one God and one Mediator between God and man", so that when we blush, when God has taken away all the dross from our countenance and covered us with felt shame, that then He should say, I have appointed a Mediator; My wisdom and My power brought forth the Mediator; He stands now to speak for you who cannot speak for yourselves. An intercessor, He intercedes for you when you are dumb. "Open Thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed unto destruction". Open Thy mouth, plead the cause of the poor and the needy. The glory of being made righteous. And remember, the remarkable word - the righteousness of God. And Paul has this same word in the Philippians - the righteousness which is of God by faith; not his own. I count all things but loss and dung and dross; all things I lose and abandon and cast away, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and do count them but dung that I may win Christ. This is glory; you will stand without any shame before God's white throne, if you have this righteousness. God ordained it. O think of it dear friends, sensible sinners. Some of you perhaps sometimes are apt to say, we have no religion, we are afraid we have no grace, we are poor ignorant creatures, more or less constantly turning away from God unto vain things which do not profit, but it is such people that get this. The poor have the gospel preached to them. The poor God filleth with good things; the rich He sendeth empty away. If you go full of yourself, you will be covered with shame. If you go empty of good and full of ill, with a little faith exercised on the Person and grace and blood and righteousness of Christ, then this glory will be given you. Given? Yes, bring no price for it. Bring no price for it, no good tempers, frames; No, all is the Lamb's. O it is hard to be nothing, but God makes it a sweet thing to be nothing. And where is this glory to be had and felt, and in which the soul is to shine? In two places. First in the church. In the Ephesians the Apostle says "Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end." And some poor sinners, many myriads of them, have had that wrought in them that has constrained them to say to their fellows "Come all ye that fear God and I will tell you what He has done

for my soul". Profession of sin, confession of Christ. Timothy witnessed a good profession before many witnesses. He had this glory. He had Christ in him and so have the people of God still, in different measures. Alas, this evil day sees but very little of this, but it exists. So, in the church, the glory of redeemed people is seen, the glory of grace, but only in a measure. It is to be seen in eternity. I could not tell you how earnestly the other day, when the Lord shined into my heart, I entreated Him to take me to be where there is no sin. Holiness does shine sometimes in the eyes of sinners, and then they understand what Dr Owen said. "It is difficult" said he "to repress the wish to go and be where the Lord is". In a very small measure I know what that difficulty is. I have felt willing to live a little longer if it would please Him to make a little use of me in the church, but I have longed lately, two or three times, to go and be with Him. O the glory of a sinner in heaven, no sin. That is an attraction, no sin. I have said, Lord do take me where I shall never sin; do take me where I shall never know sin. I have so much of it here; I am tired of it, weary of it, ashamed of it. It will be a glory. O poor sinner, you who cannot think badly enough of yourself, nor speak badly enough of yourself, what awaits you, think of it. All the goodness that God can devise and give to you in His Son, all the righteousness that Christ did work out for you, and all the pure life He gave to you by His good Spirit; all that, with other things, in its fulness, to be on you, to fill you, just to transform you into the image of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. " We know not what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is."

And now I think some of you may be saying O but we are outside of it. The Lord enable you to withdraw that and to say, though we have not attained to much, we long to have God, desire to have God, and the more you have of Him the more you will feel how little you know. When He draws near you will say O my ignorance of this great God; may I know more and more of Him. Knowledge of God kills your infidelity; knowledge of Christ kills your doubts and fears; knowledge given by the Holy Ghost

assures you of your interest in that divine wisdom which is in a mystery, even Jesus Christ ordained before the world unto our glory. O I wish it would please God to put forth His power among us and to enable those who are in doubt and fear to come forth and say "I love the Lord because He hath heard my voice and my supplication."

AMEN.