

The Era of the Hidden Secret

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the concept of the 'hidden secret' or 'mystery' in the Bible, revealing how God's ways and means were not fully understood in the Old Testament era but were revealed to Paul and others in the New Testament era.

Scripture: Genesis 3:15, Deuteronomy 18:15, Matthew 13:44, John 3:16, Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Ephesians 3:5-9, Colossians 1:26, Hebrews 11:1, James 2:26

Topics: "Hidden Secrets of God", "Faith Across Eras"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of the 'hidden secret' in God's plan, contrasting it with the outward rituals and traditions of the Old Testament. He clarifies that the term 'secret' is used to denote something that was kept hidden, rather than a mystical or mysterious concept. Sparks points out that while the Old Testament contained shadows of the truth, the fullness of God's revelation through Christ has now been disclosed, shifting from an era of external observance to one of internal faith. He stresses that the fundamental principle of faith remains unchanged across both eras, highlighting that true understanding and relationship with God transcends mere ritual. The sermon ultimately calls for a deeper spiritual comprehension of God's unchanging purpose throughout history.

Transcript

"In other generations was not made known unto the sons of men."

"From all ages hath been hid in God" (Eph. 3:5,9).

"Which hath been hid from all ages and generations" (Col. 1:26).

It will be noticed that we have chosen the alternative word to the one in the relevant Scriptures, that is, "Secret" instead of "Mystery." Our reason for so doing is to avoid the necessity of spending a lot of time in explaining that Paul was not thinking in terms of the pagan mystery religions and making Christianity another such, with differences. Neither was he thinking of something mysterious. We have heard people speak of "mystical Christianity" and of "the mystical Body of Christ." Such terms, we feel, are dangerous, because they open the mental door to mysticism which is false spirituality. Mysticism leads multitudes of people into a wholly false and deceived position as regards Christianity. We want to say here with great emphasis that, contrary to many false definitions of the Letter to the Ephesians, that Letter is in another world altogether from mysticism! It is intensely real and practical, and there are no illusions about it. To

use the word "Secret" is to be easily understood, whereas "mystery" suggests to the ordinary mind something remote from comprehension. By "Secret" the simple meaning is that something was not made known, but hidden, or kept in reserve. This will be more fully defined as we go on. In this chapter we are mainly concerned with the fact of the secret, not with the nature of it, which will be the subject of the chapter to follow. As to the fact, by that we mean that it did definitely exist and was ever and in all things the great reality in the mind of God. Indeed, it was implicit, if not explicit, in all the ways and means of God. It was no myth, but a positive reality. It was the hidden meaning of God's ways, and of the means that He employed. We, to whom the "secret" or "mystery" has now been disclosed, find it very difficult indeed to use the Old Testament without giving that meaning. But to the people of that dispensation, with a few exceptions of partial enlightenment, only the events, the instruments, and the objects were known. They did things and employed things because they were commanded to do so. Their entire system--given by God --was objective, outward. Even where and when there was sincerity, devoutness, reverence, and zeal, it was to an outward form and with outward means. The heart could be in it, and there could be strong conviction that it was right, and yet, withal, true spiritual understanding was absent. That lack of spiritual understanding could--and often did--mean misunderstanding, and that misunderstanding led to hard and even cruel behaviour.

This fact comes out in a glaring way in the days when God's Son was here in the flesh. It would almost seem that the Spirit of Truth had--among other things --the deliberate intention in inspiring the Gospels to expose this terrible fact that men could be fiercely and utterly committed to the outward and objective things of tradition, ritual, dogmas, etc., and at the same time be utterly remote from their spiritual meaning and value. The Apostle of whom we are speaking just now was formerly one of these people. He said that he 'verily thought that he ought to do many things contrary to Christ,' and he did vehemently what he believed his understanding of his Bible demanded. It is just at this point that the Apostle focused his revelation as to the change in the Divine economy from one era to another. This is the significance of his words regarding the mystery being hidden from ages and generations. He knew, and no one knew better than he, the nature and features of that Old Testament economy. It was an economy of externals; ritual, vestments, liturgies, formalities, particular places, e.g. buildings and localities; men dressed differently from other men; names and titles, religious classes, and the thousand-and-one other things which went to make up the religious system; orders, adornments and procedure. It was the system of the visible, tangible, temporal, and palpable. Very wonderful, elaborate, attractive, impressive; the processions of high priests, priests and attendants, with robes, mitres and censers, etc. It was so familiar to Paul in his former life, and it was just the things, beside which there was nothing comparable.

Now, something had happened which made it all a system of shadows without the substance: it had--for him--receded from reality, and it belonged to a past and disposed of childhood. Yes, so he described it in his Letter to the Galatians. For him, any carry-over of that kind of thing was failure in apprehension of God's mind; failure in "growing up"; failure in spiritual understanding; a clinging to childish things: in a word, contradiction to the very meaning of Christ and the advent of the Holy Spirit. With Paul the revolution was radical and, while he loved the people in that proscribed system, he felt keenly the falsehood of their position. It will be in our next chapter that we shall seek to show what it really was that was hidden from the people of that era and from those who carried the features of that era beyond God's appointed time into a new and completely different era, even to our own time.

We are at present dealing only with the inclusive fact of the hiddenness. There are one or two matters to which we must refer in particular. One has to do with what was not hidden in that era. This is necessary in

order to arrive at the essential "Secret."

The coming and expectation of the "Messiah", the "Christ" (the same word in different languages) was certainly no mystery. That "Seed" had been foretold immediately sin entered (Genesis 3:15) and Moses had prophesied the rising of the Prophet (Deut. 18:15). References to the Coming One are many: His birth, His life, His anointing, His sufferings and His glory.

Then there was no secret as to salvation being preached to the Gentiles. That is not an exclusively New Testament truth, nor a part of the Mystery now revealed. The same is true as to the Kingdom of God. That is not made known as a fact for the first time in the New Testament. There are other things also in the New Testament which are quite apparent in the Old.

One other thing needs to be emphasized as not changing with the two eras. It is the basic law of all that relates to God. Some confusion has come into the minds of many in relation to the change from law to grace. When everything has been rightly said as to our being no longer under the Law, but now under grace, the idea has slipped in that the fundamental principle has changed with the dispensations. This is not so. The principle, or law, which is the same in every era is faith. Faith was no less the governing law in the Old Testament than it is in the New; and no more in the New than in the Old. In that age it was not the works by themselves that justified. Neither in Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, nor any other of the army mentioned in Hebrews eleven was it what they did that found the way through to God (although there was a significance in what they actually did), it was faith in God that was virtuous. Works without faith are as ineffective as faith without works. There is no conflict between Paul and James. They are only the two sides to one thing. (Perhaps James was more of a legalist than Paul.) The key to every approval in the Old Testament is "He believed God." It is so very clear that God placed this law beneath and behind everything. Very big changes exist in the two dispensations, it is true. In the old, God blessed in temporal and material ways. Obey God; be faithful to God's commands, and blessing will be upon "thy basket and thy store"; your family and your field. Prosperity will be on your labours and there will be facilitation of your success. But underneath all that there was the law of faith. It is unchanging with times and economies. Paul has not been shown a new principle. This has nothing to do with his "revelation" in particular. The "secret" lies beyond that, although his doctrine of justification was admittedly revolutionary and upsetting. He really only made faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ dominant and thereby its closure of an old order of things. Of course, much time and space is required to elucidate Paul's doctrine of justification, but that he has done for us. We are saying that "the mystery" as revealed to Paul particularly is not a new idea as to the law of faith, although the basis of faith may be literally changed from men's works to Christ's finished work. Works themselves do not justify, but the justified man works the works of faith.

It is important and helpful to know that, in the old era, God was not working with a different mind from that which belongs to this present era. His mind is unchanging in its nature and purpose. If His method and means change, His thoughts and object remain the same from eternity to eternity. Because in one era He hides these essential concepts, it does not mean that they are not implicitly in all that He chooses and uses. What comes to light in the subsequent dispensation is not new in the sense of never having been before in the goings of God. It is only what God has been consistently working toward all along. So, when the secret is out, we are able to see it in the ways of God with persons and people and things from the beginning. There are no after-thoughts with God.

"The sovereign rule of heaven is like A TREASURE which A MAN found in a field, and HID it, and in his joy he sold everything that he had, and BOUGHT that field" (Matt. 13:44--Free translation).

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